

**“NOT THE STORY I LEARNED, BUT . . . THE STORY I TELL”:  
(RE)PRESENTATION, REPAIR, AND ASIAN CANADIAN  
WOMEN’S WRITING OF THE MID-1990s**

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For Edward and Hermie Masa, who made North America and all else possible for me,  
and for Isabella, my second generation Filipino Canadian,  
whose happy stories, I hope, will also one day be told

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines selected literary works by Anita Rau Badami, Denise Chong, Hiromi Goto, Larissa Lai, and Kerri Sakamoto, exploring how their stories respond both to the absence of representations of Asian Canadian women in literary discourses of the early twentieth century and to homogenizing assumptions in official histories. My formulation of *(re)presentation* in the title recognizes the multiplicity and constructedness of these denoted identities and experiences and the self-representations of these writers as a response to this elision and misrepresentation. The term *repair* borrows from philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson's theorizing of "narrative repair," which involves telling counterstories, but also is used in psychological contexts as a healing mechanism. An elaboration of both models, as applied in this study, is optimally useful in diasporic contexts as resistance to the elision and/or racist and gendered discursive constructions of Asian Canadian women and as restoration of damaged identities. The texts under study—*Tamarind Mem*, *The Concubine's Children*, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, *When Fox Is a Thousand*, and *The Electrical Field*—were all published in the mid-1990s, after the initial forays into the writing of novels by Asian Canadian authors such as Joy Kogawa (1981) and SKY Lee (1990). My choice of these sister narratives recognizes the family as central to identity construction and intergenerational (mis)understanding and emphasizes the importance of this period's second-generation explosion of writings by Japanese, Chinese, and Indo Canadian women that paved the way for the current plethora of writings by authors from these cultural groups that contribute significantly to Canadian representations of diasporic identity.

This study explores the nuances and pluralisms of the representations of Asian Canadian women. The texts under consideration are cultural autobiographies and matrilineal or sexually transgressive narratives that reinvent the cultural memory of Canadian women of Asian ancestry; produce cultural fusions through the transcreation of oral traditions and simulations of the oral, transcoding of ancestral tongues, and discursive strategies of silence; and address connections between self and place in examinations of Canada, the adopted country, as (un)homely territory. Presenting unhyphenated diasporic female subjects who exceed socially scripted boundaries of gender, sexuality, race, and nationality, in terms of both Canada and the writers' and protagonists' ancestral Asian nations, these "acts of narrative insubordination" (Nelson 8) exemplify emancipatory politics and recuperative and revisionary projects.

Interrogating questions of (re)presentation and repair from positions of liminality and across gendered, racial, linguistic, and geographical divides, this research contributes to current urgent discussions of identity, transculturation, multiculturalism, and globalization in literary and cultural studies.

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*In my fiction writing of recent years I have been focusing on trying to create a sort of historical launch pad for hybrid flowers like myself. I have been trying to foster the germination of a culture of women identified women of Chinese descent living in the West. I suppose it is my way of trying to escape the reactiveness of identity politics by claiming a mythic, fictive sort of originality, my way of saying, but people like me (take that how you will) have been here all along, and we are infinitely more than the sum of the identities that this statistics crazy society wants to pin on me.*

*Larissa Lai, Interview with Ashok Mathur, July 1998*

**(RE)PRESENTATION, REPAIR, AND  
ASIAN CANADIAN WOMEN'S WRITING**

*The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading; not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words...*

— Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 62-63

My fascination with women's stories and their words that might liberate and empower those who are marginalized, as Maxine Hong Kingston alludes to in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, began years ago in the Philippines in a Literary Theory and Criticism class that examined women's writing and minority literatures. A few years later, my migration to the United States of America and then Canada introduced me, respectively, to Chinese American Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and to Japanese Canadian Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. These books helped start me on this journey of a dissertation, nurturing an interest in contemporary Asian North American women's writing, particularly in narratives that present similar experiences of "losing a being or a country" in the contexts of "foreignness, exile, war," as Hélène Cixous writes, and of then finding in "the country of words" semblances of "home" and self (1-18). Kingston's and Kogawa's retracing of the complex terrain traveled by Asian migrants and their North-American-born children not only reminds me of my own forays—geographical, cultural, and linguistic—but also offers me opportunities to scrutinize these writers' notions of self, voice, and

place, their explorations of the ramifications of exile and belonging, and their strategies of resistance and repair.

Anita Rau Badami, Denise Chong, Hiromi Goto, Larissa Lai, and Kerri Sakamoto, the five writers in this study, continue Kingston's and Kogawa's projects through their own stories, which demonstrate Kingston's concept of words as a retribution for oppression, outlined in the section of her famous novel that serves as an epigraph for this chapter. Amidst debilitating stereotypes about Asian women in official histories and their relative invisibility, as writers and characters, in Canadian literature prior to the 1980s, as brief surveys in this chapter will attest, these writers articulate a political self-awareness that helps constitute Asian Canadian women as subjects in literature, legitimizing their presence and experience in current discourses.<sup>1</sup> Larissa Lai, as noted in the epigraph to this dissertation, explains how her fiction, in "claiming a mythic, fictive sort of originality," becomes her "way of saying, but people like me (take that how you will) have been here all along, and we are infinitely more than the sum of the identities that this statistics crazy society wants to pin on me" (Interview). Lai's and the other four authors' efforts at rewriting themselves and their experience in Canada are similar to Kingston's "vengeance," embodying justice for Asian North American women's obscurity and misrepresentation during those early years.

I argue in this dissertation that the five books in this study—*Tamarind Mem*, *The Concubine's Children*, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, *When Fox Is a Thousand*, and *The Electrical Field*—are a family of contemporaneous texts offering critical and complex representations of Asian Canadian women and their experiences as response to their discursive absence or misrepresentation in early twentieth-century Canada. As will be discussed in more detail later, these texts provide various forms of what philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson calls "narrative repair." They recover

the often neglected histories and current transnational experiences of Asian Canadian women through the intersections of fiction, (auto)biography, and mother-daughter writing; challenge reductive historical descriptions of Asian and Asian Canadian women with more nuanced portrayals that include power through transgressive sexuality; incorporate narrative strategies such as simulations of orality, code-switching, and silence; and explore the discursive meaning of home. Further, they create women-centred and positively ethnicized accounts that draw freely from both Asian and Canadian traditions.

Using anti-racist and materialist feminist critical perspectives, I read these five Asian Canadian texts as sister narratives that emphasize the family as a significant site of identity construction and intergenerational (mis)understanding and that work to repair negative explanatory scripts about transcultural female subjectivity. This narrative family continues the emancipatory politics of earlier key Asian Canadian novels such as Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990). It is composed of women's writings from 1994 to 1998, a historical period that saw a flowering of contemporary Asian Canadian literary production. Important texts by Asian Canadian men such as Wayson Choy's *Jade Peony* (1995) and Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* (1996) were published within this time frame, but this study focuses on women's self-representations, both autobiographical and fictional. Emphasizing this period's significance, Coral Ann Howells, in *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities*, mentions the presence of Canadian women's fiction on international publishers' lists, the frequent awarding of literary prizes to women, and the phenomenal growth of writing by women of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, those not deemed "White" and "Western" but who have the immense potential to contribute to Canadian discussions about transcultural identities (1). In *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*, Lai herself

refers to those years as an “extraordinary moment in Canadian cultural politics,” connecting the passion and possibilities of the times to her own “emergence from the sleep of invisibilization into a subject with a measure of public voice” (ix). Writings of this period celebrated Asian women in Canada coming into print and recognized the potency of their voices, as gendered and negatively racialized writers who were privileging new ways of being and of being heard.

Chong and Lai, both Chinese Canadian, Goto and Sakamoto, who are Japanese Canadian, and Badami, who is originally from India, come from the three Asian cultural groups in Canada that have large numbers of women writers publishing fiction. While several of the writers in this study have won major literary prizes, their texts are also chosen for their engagement with what it means to be “othered” in Canadian society—to be rendered both hypervisible in some respects and all but invisible in others—and because their works both fully acknowledge Asian cultural origins and are set largely or partly in Canadian locations. These writers’ characters occupy ambiguous spaces between cultures and languages and negotiate multiple subject positions marked by transculturation and heterogeneity, their dual placement in both Canada and Asia central to discussions of (re)presentation and repair.

Although this dissertation’s primary theoretical underpinning is *narrative repair*, which is introduced in Nelson’s *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* and is reconfigured in Lauren E. Jennings’s “Self Discrepancy and Narrative Repair,” I will also consider in certain chapters theoretical concepts such as Kandice Chuh’s related notion of “imagining otherwise,” orality and textualized orature, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and various other feminist and decolonizing paradigms. Identities damaged by marginalizing discourses or by abusive power systems can be restored, according to Nelson, through *counterstory*, a “narrative that takes up a shared but oppressive understanding of who someone is and sets out to shift it” (69). These counter-

discourses are depictive, selective, interpretive accounts and representations of oppressed groups or individuals that enable them to establish or re-establish membership in the community (xii-xiii, 11-12). Such “acts of narrative insubordination” (8) first identify the master narratives that form the basis for oppressive misrepresentations of persons or groups, and then retell the person’s or group’s story so that “morally relevant details are made visible and the people or group are shown to be respectable moral agents” (7). These discourses thus augment and correct master narratives (6), restoring the agency critical for respect to those denied such agency by externally imposed racist and patriarchal discursive constructions.<sup>2</sup>

For Jennings, narrative repair, as psychological healing mechanism, considers threats to people’s integrity amidst contradictory views of themselves or groups with which they identify. She acknowledges that “when people’s identities are threatened with feedback that runs counter to their idea of who they are, stories that demonstrate self-stability may be an effective tool for diffusing this threat, as these might help them distinguish between what is enduring and what is situational” (4). These self-stabilizing stories, which remember and narrate positive experiences unrelated to the threat, help maintain self-meaning and are integral to narrative repair (iv).

Nelson’s notion of counterstory as present within hierarchical relationships, especially within the context of domination and oppression, parallels similar concepts defined earlier by postcolonial theorists. These include Richard Terdiman’s *counter-discourse*, “principal discursive systems by which writers and artists sought to project an alternative, liberating *newness* against the absorptive capacity of those established discourses” (13, original italics), and *writing back*, which originated in Salman Rushdie’s phrase the “Empire writes back” to the imperial “centre” (8) and was reiterated in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back*. Nelson’s counterstorying focuses, however, on the notion of repair, with self-constituting narratives

working to make whole damaged identities so the subject can attain or regain moral agency or freedom (150). In this study, a multiplicity of identities are repaired (or potentially repaired) by these texts: the characters in these narratives, but also individuals from the “damaged” groups, including the authors themselves, and possibly people from the wider community who read these texts and are influenced by them.

Examples of narrative repair are evident in earlier writing by Asian Canadians and show how this restoration can prompt both symbolic and material reparation. Writers such as Wong Foon Sieng/Huāng Kuānxiān secured restitution for the payment of the so-called head tax, a fixed fee levied on every Chinese individual entering Canada, that since 1885 had deterred immigration by Chinese nationals. His many articles, particularly one published in the June 3, 1955, issue of the *Chinatown News*, advocated for equal immigration rights for Chinese citizens, and were influential in the government’s adoption of a policy allowing Chinese men residing in Canada for two years to post a \$1,000 cash bond for their fiancées from China, enabling more women to enter Canada (Wong). Roy Miki and Joy Kogawa similarly mobilized support for redress against Canada’s internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War; Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* drew attention to anti-Japanese racism, helping negotiate the settlement between the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) and the federal government. Signed on September 22, 1988, the settlement included a formal apology to Japanese Canadians and a compensation package of nearly \$400 million (Oiwa 15), including \$21,000 for each of about 12,000 Japanese Canadian survivors; \$24 million to finance a Canadian Race Relations Foundation; \$12 million to a community fund supporting educational, social, and cultural activities in the Japanese Canadian community (Burns, “Ottawa Will Pay”); the reinstatement of citizenship to Japanese Canadians

who had been forcibly “repatriated” to Japan; and the clearing of criminal records related to violations of the War Measures Act.

An elaboration of both Nelson’s and Jennings’s models of repair is useful in this study’s diasporic contexts. Challenging the discursive silencing and normative constructions of Asian Canadian women, Badami, Chong, Goto, Lai, and Sakamoto dismantle the few but influential discriminatory images of these women, particularly of them as mere objects of male desire. They replace these stereotypical scripts with more nuanced examinations of Asian Canadian female selves and experiences. This narrative repair, I argue, does not necessarily translate to the “respectworthy moral agent” always and consistently making moral choices in her behavior, which is not likely across a lifetime. Rather, Badami, Chong, Goto, Lai, and Sakamoto effect a complex form of narrative repair, by rendering their characters complicated, fallible, and human in works that revise both the absence and the misrepresentation of Asian Canadian women in previous narrations of Canada’s cross-cultural relations. This alternative to master narratives, in Nelson’s terms, both “resists and replaces a narrative that is oppressive, rehabilitates a damaged identity, and frees a person’s agency” (155), especially by “personalizing the identity that the master narrative leaves generic” (153).

As “*stories of self definition*, told in response to the twin harms of *deprivation of opportunity* and *infiltrated consciousness*” (Nelson 9, original italics), the narratives in this study resist the “assumption that people with a particular group identity are to be subordinated to others, or denied access to personal and social goods” (8). These counterstories signal the refusal of the graceful obligation of silence frequently required of women of Asian origin, reclaiming instead insider female voices that tell and thus legitimate alternative stories. In interrogating the issues of exclusion and belonging, especially in the contexts of ancestral and diasporic communities and the



construction of women's subjectivities within transnational locales, these narratives work to repair the damage caused by discursive absences or previously demeaning discourses, providing compelling opportunities for a re-examination and (re)presentation of Asian Canadians as individuals and as groups. They also introduce the possibility that people who have been traditionally oppressed "can enjoy greater freedom to do what they ought" (Nelson 7), emphasizing the liberatory politics inherent in such writings.

An examination of the various histories of Asian Canadian women is critical to this study; hence, a brief survey of these histories is included in this introduction. In an attempt not to essentialize Asian Canadian women's experience, this survey emphasizes Asian women's heterogeneity and the fact that notions of *Asian* and *woman* are multiple and cannot be reduced to a monolithic perspective. This study sets out to explain what may have obscured Asian Canadian women's histories; it also addresses the poetics of opposition and representation and the (re)negotiation of identity that the writers, who belong to specific cultural groups that are categorized more broadly as Asian, attempt in their texts.

The subject of hyphenated identity is briefly examined in this introductory chapter, as are the immigration history and discriminatory legislation that limited the influx of Asian women, the racism and sexism that was part of their experience in Canada, and the discursive terrain into which the writers in the study enter their own (re)presentations. This chapter demonstrates that the works of writers prior to *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Cafe* such as those by Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna (Edith Eaton and Winnifred Eaton Reeve) provide early templates for the politics of the authors in this study. The chapter then examines the historical absence of Asian women in the geographical and discursive terrains of early Canada, and the absence of Asian female voices and

positions on issues critical to representation such as history, sexuality, matrilineality, language, and nation, amidst negative scripting of women of Asian descent by those from the majority culture.

## **(UN)HYPHENATED IDENTITIES**

While I use the term *Asian Canadian* in my study, I acknowledge possible objections to it, such as that the term inadequately represents the diversity of cultural groups, religions, and languages it covers. Eleanor Ty argues that such a term does not sufficiently explain “the complexity of one’s social and political subjectivity in today’s globalized culture” (“Unfastening” 1). In her discussion of the term *Asian American*, Ty notes that it can be “stretched to accommodate people with very mixed and plural identities owing to diverse social, linguistic, and cultural memberships, either socially, linguistically, or culturally” (“Unfastening” 17). However, while the parallel term *Asian Canadian* is also too limited to fit the multifarious nature of these various peoples and their cultural productions, there are few workable alternatives. In the absence of a term that could encapsulate what Lisa Lowe calls the “heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity” of people in these groups (“Heterogeneity” 24), I retain the term *Asian Canadian* when I refer to various people as a collective.

Certainly, the term is on some occasions useful in signaling solidarity and similarity of experience. According to Jo-Anne Lee in her 2006 essay “Issues in Constituting Asian Canadian Feminisms,” struggles like the Japanese redress movement, the preservation of Chinatowns, the countering of media stereotyping of Chinese Canadian university students, and the defense of the Writing through Race Conference against charges of reverse racism generated political solidarity and cultural nationalism that continue to make the term useful a few decades after it came into being (26-27). The term’s strategic essentialism is, I argue, necessary to counter the historic

negative racialization and ethnicization of people with ancestral or personal origins on the continent of Asia. As Gayatri Spivak suggests, such a “strategic use of positivist essentialism” requires keeping the term’s political interests “scrupulously visible” (205). It includes a “transactional reading” that involves “strategically adhering to an essentialist notion of consciousness” in order to write various subjects into history (206-7). Notwithstanding the possibility, and likely danger, of homogenizing and therefore potentially erasing the nuances of these writers’ specific stories, my strategic essentializing emphasizes common marginalization experiences, communal gendered and racialized articulations, and empowered resistances that are critical to my examination of these authors’ attempts at (re)presenting Asian Canadian women’s lives and experiences and their repair of past damage to female Asian Canadian identities.

Aware of the limitations of the term Asian Canadian, I use it as a collective descriptor to refer to female writers of Asian ancestry or origin who have been born in or have had extensive experience living in Canada. In my detailed discussions of works and authors, I acknowledge each writer individually, in terms of birthplace, ancestral origin, and social class, but also in regard to her reasons for writing. Such specificity addresses the writers’ border-crossing affiliations—Lai, for example, was born in California but now lives and works in Vancouver—and situates their work within the particularity of their experiences, with what Ty calls the “appreciation of global and transnational subjectivity and the imaginative range of these authors who are called to ‘represent’ or speak for us” (“Unfastening” 17). This acknowledgement recognizes the diversity of agency, subjectivity, and sense of self of women of Asian descent in Canada and represents the multiplicity of female Asian Canadian experiences.

The term Asian Canadian is often hyphenated, but that hyphenation is contentious. In “Half-Bred Poetics,” Fred Wah refers to the hyphen as “that marked (or unmarked) space that both

binds and divides,” as “the operable tool that both compounds difference and underlines sameness” (1). The hyphen, in Wah’s formulation, reiterates an identity that will always exist in tension between two or more cultures and places. The hyphen can create connections, but can, within the context of racism, also oppress as it appears to privilege one part of the term over the other. In “Interrogating the Hyphen-Nation: Canadian Multicultural Policy and ‘Mixed Race’ Identities,” Minelle Mahtani writes that the hyphen is often associated with multiculturalism in Canada, which acknowledges Canadian citizens’ identification with a culture of their choice (165). Mahtani’s argument about hyphenated identities attributed to new immigrants—that the hyphen creates “spaces of distance, in which [marked] ethnicity is positioned outside Canadianness—as an addition to it, but also as an exclusion from it” (168)<sup>3</sup>—emphasizes the peril of the hyphen in identity phrases and helps explain my omission of it in this study. The hyphen suggests the asymmetrical relations of power in the Canadian political landscape; inasmuch as this short dash may connect Asian and Canadian, it similarly segregates them, separating differing racial communities and cultural localities. More importantly, it subordinates one to the other, serving as a metaphor for the complex and conflicted relations between Asia and Canada and between Asian Canadian and EuroCanadian subjects. My choice to do away with the hyphen not only in Asian Canadian but also in Chinese Canadian, Japanese Canadian, and Indian Canadian suggests the irreducibility of *Asian* and *Canadian* at the same time as they are inexorably linked.

These concerns with (un)hyphenation, and with matters related to globalization such as multiculturalism and cultural imperialism, have radically informed and transformed transnational subjectivities and representation; they are critical to my exploration of (re)presentation and particular aspects of identity politics in this study.<sup>4</sup> My use of *identity* recognizes several approaches and definitions and understands the term as a dialogue between the self and others,

between prescription and improvisation, and between ontology and performance. Created not only internally but also externally, identity is what Nelson calls the “complicated interaction of one’s own sense of self and others’ understanding of who one is” (xi); the latter can be altered by social location, assigned by a dominant group, and function as an othering strategy that seeks to subordinate the minoritized subject or constituency. It is what Linda Martin Alcoff refers to as “positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives” (“Political Critique”) and what Paula Moya suggests are “socially significant and context-specific ideological [constructs] that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world” (96-97). Nelson’s, Alcoff’s and Moya’s castings of identity as reflective of a subject’s relations with the world are reflected in my assumption in this study of identity as shaped by history and present circumstances; of identity as frequently influenced by the minoritizing impact of race, ethnicity, and gender; and of an individual’s identity as related to membership in or exclusion from certain groups. Donna Haraway’s notion of “fractured identities” also recognizes the many differences, partialities, and contradictions in identities especially of the marginalized (154), and supports my argument in this study that identity is neither singular nor only predetermined or prescribed, but multiple. Identities are thus both ontological and continually negotiated, assigned but also asserted, with history and current social conditions implicated in their constructions. Within the context of my study, identities can be Asian but also Canadian, emerging and evolving within the contested processes of globalization and imperialism, and are manifold: heterosexual woman, lesbian, wife, lover, grandmother, mother, daughter, victim, survivor, victor, and more. Finally, Stuart Hall designates cultural identity as that which is said to exist and that which is constantly “produc[ed],” being “subject to the continual play of history, culture, and power”

(“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 223). Such notions of identity as being fluid and not fixed, of it as about “becoming” as much as about “being,” reinforce what Hall suggests of identity as constructed within representation. For Hall, identity becomes “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (223-24). These concepts connect closely to (re)presentation and narrative repair since they recognize, as I do, that subjects are constituted within discourses and that texts can work to revise identities.

Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht’s understanding of Asian Canadian identities incorporates the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and constructedness of these identities and acknowledges the “layering” of their diverse aspect as one negotiates the “politics of one’s imaginary and adopted homeland(s), as well as the importance of memory, myth and art in the construction of self” (2). The struggle with origins and differences because of globalization and the changing contours of the national and transnational, intensified by the systemic and structural, even historical, inequalities around Asian experiences of immigration, labour, and law in North America also results in a “sense of otherness” constitutive of these identities (3). This marginalizing is demonstrated in this study as these identities are held against an asymmetry in power relations and the dichotomies, in particular, between West and East, white and coloured, male and female.

As products of the new *diasporas* created by postcolonial migrations, Asian Canadian women construct new, evolving, hybrid identities as they navigate among multiple cultures and many languages, and inhabit several homes.<sup>5</sup> My use of *culture* in this study borrows from Raymond Williams’s definition of “social” culture, which understands it to be “a particular way of life, which expresses certain ways of meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in ordinary life” (48). Here it includes worldviews, traditions, artistic artifacts, languages, and shared understandings of prevailing norms, rites, and rituals. Although I may refer to culture in ways that

suggest stasis, I understand that dynamics, fluidity, and change are also key elements of culture. Hall states that cultural identities emerge “*in transition*, between different positions,” simultaneously draw on “different cultural traditions,” and evolve as results of “complicated crossovers and cultural mixes that are increasingly common in a globalized world” (“The Future” 266, original italics). Such claims support the argument that women of Asian ancestry in Canada, as with other migrants and diasporic subjects, carry traces of their original cultures, but are also compelled to adapt to the new cultures they inhabit (265). These subjects often embrace what Jaina Sanga calls “cultures of hybridity,” as they begin to rely on different cultural practices (5). They offer new visions, frames of references, and alternative narratives, calling attention to spaces where the experience of otherness and the concerns with place and selfhood are compelling preoccupations.

Similarly, as part of groups marginalized in Canada because of negative racialization, ethnicity, gender, and sometimes age and sexual orientation, Asian Canadian women are particularly vulnerable to erasure and stereotyping, their identities in danger of being overwritten by the dominant culture. Jo-Anne Lee and Linda Cardinal claim, and I concur, that because *Canadianness* is still “imagined as naturally white, male, Christian, middle and upper class, English-speaking, British, and more recently, Northern European in cultural heritage” (218), Asian Canadians are, to an extent, denied membership in the Canadian national consciousness, unlike those of generally unmarked EuroCanadian ethnicities.<sup>6</sup> Canadians and others may consider Canada as a multicultural nation *par excellence*, and in some measure it is, as its demographic cultural plurality attests, but the state-sponsored version of multiculturalism is, in my view, only partially successful in the integration and inclusion of those with marked ethnicities. These constituencies find it difficult to identify as Canadian despite a desire to do so because systematic racism and

dominant definitions of the national narrative remain predicated on the notion of so-called whiteness.

In dominant historical discourses, representations of Asian Canadian subjects and their experiences are either missing or are overwhelmed by cliché and stereotype. In *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*, Constance Backhouse notes that John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, designated Chinese people as belonging to a “‘semi-barbari[c],’ ‘inferior race’” (140), and also cites a Regina Metropolitan Church ladies' debate held in 1912 that proposed

that the Asiatics being a different race and one which could not be assimilated with the white races, would be a menace to the unity of Canada, that they could not appreciate the aims and ideals of the westerner and that while they might be of great benefit to the world by staying in China and working to realize the ideals of their own race in conjunction with the teaching of Christianity, in Canada they tend to promote strife. (140)

Because whiteness has been perceived in the last century and a half as the norm in Canada, racist lenses conditioned a vision of Asians and Asian Canadians in ways historically and contemporaneously debilitating for them. This debate proposed Chinese Canadians, for example, as strife producers when the strife was in fact engendered by EuroCanadian racists. It is these lenses that the narrative family in this study seek to make visible and replace.

## **GENDER, IMMIGRATION, AND DISCRIMINATION**

As alluded to in the previous section, Asians in early Canada, particularly women, were subject to Canada's discriminatory immigration laws and debilitating stereotypes. Immigration



legislation largely proscribed Asian women's entry and delineated an immigration history that essentially defined them only as dependents. Helen Ralston's *The Lived Experience of South Asian Immigrant Women in Atlantic Canada: The Interconnections of Race, Class and Gender* suggests that with regards to the admission of Chinese, Japanese, and East Indian women, Canada's immigration laws have been particularly sexist, even if there has been little acknowledgment of this fact by policy makers (20). This gender bias resulted in the relative absence of Asian women in early Canada, and, thus, in historical records and literary discourses until the mid-1900s.

Unprecedented racism in the form of discriminatory Canadian legislation such as the so-called head tax and Chinese exclusion act deterred Chinese labourers from bringing their wives and children into the country, creating a bachelor society. In 1885, at around the time of the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway that used Chinese labour, a head tax of \$50 was levied on every Chinese person who entered Canada, and this tax was increased to \$100 in 1900 and \$500 in 1903. The Canadian government's goal to deter entry of poor labourers and stall Chinese immigration also resulted, in 1923, in the introduction of a revised Chinese Immigration Act, in effect until 1947. According to Peter Li in *The Chinese in Canada*, this act denied admission to persons of Chinese origin, only allowing entry to those in the diplomatic corps, merchants, students, and Chinese children born in Canada (30). Additionally, it required people of Chinese origin, regardless of citizenship, to register with the Canadian government within twelve months after the act was passed and to obtain a certificate of registration. Any Chinese person who failed to register was liable to a fine of \$500 or imprisonment or both. Moreover, Chinese persons leaving the country temporarily to return at a later date were required to give written notice to the Comptroller before departure, identifying their destination(s) and the intended routes. Chinese

people who complied would be allowed to return within two years, but those who left without registering were, upon their return, treated as new immigrants seeking entry.

Other legislative controls, discriminatory measures, and racial antagonism against the Chinese in Canada suggest that the Chinese “were considered useful to the development of western Canada but were not desirable citizens” (P. Li 12). Among the most serious of hostilities directed against the Chinese in Canada were the Vancouver riots of 1887 and 1907, aimed at vandalizing the Chinese quarters and intimidating Chinese workers to prevent them from competing with EuroCanadian workers. The Victoria School Board’s ruling in 1922, modelled on segregated schools in the United States, required that all Chinese students be placed in one separate school. Excluded from provincial elections in many provinces, including Saskatchewan and British Columbia, the Chinese were also disenfranchised in federal elections; the Dominion Elections Act of 1920 and its 1929 amendments stipulated that all voters must be British subjects, and these legislations denied those of Chinese ancestry basic citizenship rights (30-33).

After recognizing Chinese Canadians’ efforts during the Second World War—such as fighting with Canadian armed forces and raising money for the war effort—and in response to the pressure of lobby groups and the international community, Canada has addressed, and continues to address, these multiple inequities in Chinese Canadian history. The government, for instance, repealed the exclusion act in 1947; although Chinese newcomers were placed under the same immigration limits as other Asians, they were in 1947 given the right to vote in federal elections and to work as professionals.<sup>7</sup>

Canada’s immigration history, like that of the United States of America, was predicated on the moral notoriety of Chinese women, with government-endorsed immigration policies limiting their entry. From the late nineteenth into the twentieth century, perceptions of Chinese women

entering the United States as prostitutes helped fuel anti-Chinese hysteria and fears of Chinese immigration. According to Sucheng Chan, these perceived Chinese “prostitutes” were believed to have brought into the United States “especially virulent strains of venereal diseases, introduced opium addiction, and enticed young white boys to a life of sin. Chinese prostitutes were constructed as potent instruments for the debasement of white manhood, health, morality, and family life; hence, their continued presence was deemed a threat to white civilization” (138). For example, Horace Greeley, an American newspaper editor, reformer, and politician, stated in 1854 that “[t]he Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order” (qtd. in Ho 68). Such exclusion and surveillance are the results of what Yasmin Jiwani calls a pervasive perception of women from Asia as “breeders of venereal disease and, by corollary, as contaminants of the moral social order” (165).

Restrictive immigration measures in Canada had profound consequences for Chinese families and communities not only in the exclusion of wives and children but also in a parallel stereotype of Chinese Canadian women as sexually suspect. If Chinese men working on Canada’s railways and mines became indentured labourers, perceived as commodities to be exchanged, enslaved, and exploited, the very few Chinese women who did manage to join their men in Chinatown in the nineteenth century were, according to Lien Chao, made into “sexual commodities by the male-oriented culture” (219). Of the few Chinese women entering Canada from 1885 and 1990, some, Yasmeen Abu-Laban writes, were “denounced as prostitutes” at the same time as they were seen as “lessening the threat of miscegenation that single male Chinese workers posed to the dominant white society” (71). Such stereotyping not only further limited

migration opportunities for Chinese women, but also, as discussed in Chapter 1, made conditions for Chinese female immigrants challenging, as perceptions of them as morally suspect endured.

Similarly few Japanese women were part of the early Japanese Canadian community, but the Lemieux Agreement of 1908, which severely curtailed the immigration of adult males, put no limits in place on the number of Japanese wives entering Canada. “Picture brides” among the Japanese thus became common; men arranged for brides to be sent from Japan based on an exchange of photographs, and some 300 or 400 women arrived via this arrangement around 1908, with such immigration continuing from 1913 to 1928 (Wakayama 18). Like some Chinese women, however, other less fortunate Japanese women were brought over to Canada to serve in brothels, reinforcing images of the sexually suspect Asian female. Because of dominant bachelor communities, these brothels existed as early as 1890 in Victoria, Nelson, Cranbrook, and other mining and railroading towns. The women in these brothels were usually young, illiterate, from poverty-stricken villages, and sent to Canada to earn what they could to support their families in Japan. According to Tamio Wakayama in *A Dream of Riches: The Japanese Canadians, 1877 to 1977*, most lived caged existences, dying without leaving any record of their lives (19).

Additionally, the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War silenced Japanese voices, including those of women. Muriel Kitagawa’s letters alone, eventually edited by Roy Miki and published in 1985 as *This Is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948*, record more obvious female efforts against Canadian atrocities at that time; more recently, Kogawa’s *Obasan* provides a similar indictment of that incarceration. This specific moment of anti-Japanese racism in Canada’s history is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 of this study, with Kerri Sakamoto’s exploration of the residual effects of the internment on a Japanese Canadian community in Ontario.

Racist ideologies also permeated immigration policies relating to South Asian people, including those from India.<sup>8</sup> When the perceived threat of massive Asian immigration provoked the 1907 Vancouver riot, the rhetoric of state documents suggested that South Asian men were “the most dangerous” because they were supposedly “challenging or ignoring racial boundaries constructed by male white British Columbia labour” (Ralston 23). A bill to disenfranchise all “natives of India not of Anglo-Saxon parents” was introduced in British Columbia in March 1907, and in April of that year, South Asians were denied the vote in Vancouver by a change in the Municipality Incorporation Act (Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava 21). Canada, through William Lyon Mackenzie King, then Deputy Minister of Labour, negotiated with the British government to restrict South Asian immigration, and England concurred with Canada’s restriction of such migration. As King reported, the British authorities readily accepted Canada’s stance on the matter: “That Canada should desire to restrict immigration from the Orient is regarded as natural, that Canada should remain a white man’s country is to be not only desired for economic and social reasons, ... [but is also] necessary on political and national grounds” (qtd. in Price 70).

Many of the policies against South Asians in Canada were also gender discriminatory. A *Vancouver Sun* editorial of 1913, an articulation of a white settler’s perspective, suggests that Hindus are “not an assimilable people”: “We must not permit the men of that race to come in large numbers, and we must not permit their women to come in at all. Such a policy of exclusion is simply a measure of self-defence.... We have no right to imperil the comfort and happiness of the generations that are to succeed us” (“Editorial” 6). As Ralston argues, by constructing “all women, by implication, and South Asian immigrant women in particular, as breeders of the next generation” (27), opposition to the miscegenation between South Asians and whites became a basis for legislation against South Asian female migration. The exclusion of South Asian women

was made possible in particular through the 1908 “continuous passage” stipulation, an Order-in-Council that required an immigrant to come to Canada by continuous journey from the country of national origin or citizenship and with a through ticket purchased in that country. South Asians could not meet the requirement because the Canadian government prohibited the Canadian Pacific Railway from selling a through ticket in India (Bolaria and Li 170). The stipulation effectively halted South Asian immigration for a time, such that between 1908 and 1912 only twenty men and six women entered Canada (Ralston 25).

A patriarchal ideology informing state legislation assigned men the role of production and women that of reproduction, always constructing them in their relationship as “wives” of immigrant men. The “womanhood of immigrant wives and their productive role in the economy,” as Ralston suggests, “were completely absent from rhetoric and reality” (25). Racialized and sexist ideologies are also evident in the special case of Anglo-Indians (the descendants of one Indian parent and one British parent). In *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*, Norman Buchignani, Doreen Indra, and Ram Srivastava report that an Anglo-Indian with a British father and an Indian mother, according to government policies decreed in 1924, could migrate; however, an Anglo-Indian with a British mother and an Indian father could not. British immigrants with South Asian spouses were also subjected to the same patriarchally discriminatory policy (72). Only in 1924 was a practical procedure for the registration of wives put into place, enabling a total of only 145 adult women from India to enter Canada between 1920 and 1930.

The *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914 also exemplifies Canada’s willingness to enforce its racist immigration policy against South Asians. The ship carrying 376 Punjabis, mostly Sikhs, wishing to migrate to Canada, was denied entry and ultimately forced to return to Asia after two months in the Vancouver harbour (“Komagata Maru” 1). Records indicate that prior to the Second

World War, more than 5,000 South Asian men entered Canada as compared to fewer than 250 women and approximately 400 children. And even in 1951, men outnumbered women in the ratio of three to one: 1,427 males or 66% to 731 females or 34% (Ralston 29). Such unbalanced sex composition within the South Asian population denotes, quite possibly, gender roles in Asia which typically assign women to the home, but especially the disadvantage of immigration laws to women.

As demonstrated by these specific histories of Asian women's migrations to Canada, discriminatory immigration and internment policies against Chinese, Japanese, and Indian groups were gendered as well as racialized. They were influenced by and paralleled American policies, which endorsed images of these women as prostitutes, concubines, and picture brides, resulting in only a few women arrivals in Canada during the initial phases of these migrations.

## **DISCURSIVE SILENCE AND EARLY SPEECH**

Asian women's oppressed status and skewed gender ratio in early Asian Canada ensured that racism and sexism prevailed not only in immigration and everyday experience, but also in mainstream discourses at that time. Notwithstanding writing by sisters Edith and Winnifred Eaton, discussed in more detail later, Asian immigrants to Canada were hardly mentioned in Canadian literature of the early to mid-1900s. This exclusion is perhaps best illustrated in E. J. Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), a narrative poem that tells the story of the construction of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway from 1871 through 1885. As F. R. Scott notes in "All the Spikes but the Last," his corrective response, Pratt barely mentions the thousands of indentured Chinese labourers who actually built much of the railway. Scott ends his own poem by asking, "Is all Canada has to say to them written in the Chinese Immigration Act?" (64).

While Scott's poem is an important intervention, it also suggests that if Asian characters were written into the literature of the period, these characters were almost always men. Because the majority of Asian immigrants were males, either unmarried or with wives left behind in their home countries, the bachelor demographic was carried over into literary works, including those by Canadian women writers. The very few representations of Asians in such Canadian novels and short stories render them negatively and as peripheral to non-Asian characters. Nellie McClung's novel *Painted Fires*, published in 1925, includes a minor character, a Chinese Canadian man who runs an "opium den" in which the young female protagonist is accidentally trapped and morally discredited. Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller* (1949), *The Equations of Love* (1952), and *Swamp Angel* (1954) include characters such as Yow, the name of the Chinese cook in both of Wilson's early books, and Joey and Angus Quong in *Swamp Angel*, one of whom drives a taxi and the other who works at a lake lodge. Yow, in his "white coat and apron" and his hair "plaited in a queue" (*The Equations of Love* 128), transforms at night into a stereotypical depraved, duplicitous Chinese man who frequents dark, smoke-filled gambling dens, lusting after white women such as Lilly Walker. Lilly is repelled by Yow, referring to him as a "Chink," but is also drawn to his expensive bicycle and gifts of fancy silk stockings and other stolen trousseau items. In the end, she leaves him as he is arrested by police, the conclusion dangling damaging assumptions of Chinese men as criminal and morally depraved. The Quong brothers of *Swamp Angel* provide a contrast to Yow in their respectability: while Vera, the lodge owner's wife, is wary of hiring someone Chinese Canadian, to Maggie Lloyd, the novel's heroine, Joey has "bland intelligent eyes" and Angus is "a wholly satisfactory boy" (*Swamp Angel* 24, 206). Although Maggie's proclamation that "I can't see what difference *race* can make" (107, original italics) appears to validate Asians as legitimate characters, their position in Wilson's book remains ambiguous. Maggie's attachment



to Joey results from him being no longer entirely Chinese to her, for he “had not a secret look. She thought she understood him and that East and West blended in him in a way that seemed open to her. Perhaps he was now more Canadian than Chinese” (25). In blurring the Quong brothers’ racial and cultural affiliations, Maggie’s seeming valorization betrays a racism that still glorifies Canadianness and renders Asians as typically inscrutable and deferential to the Canadians in the text; certainly they are largely invisible, appearing only in the novel’s earlier and later chapters. These marginalizing representations continue with the title character in “Where Will You Go, Sam Lee Wong?” from Gabrielle Roy’s collection of short stories *Garden in the Wind* (1975; translated 1977). Tracing Wong’s many travails and meager successes setting up cafes in Horizon and Sweet Clover, Saskatchewan, Roy depicts the bachelor existence of Chinese immigrants in early Canada but also reinforces a common image of these men as docile, inadequate, and impotent.

One of the first well-known positive representations of an Asian Canadian woman in a EuroCanadian novel appeared as late as 1964 in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*. Laurence’s character Sandra Wong serves a narrative function as a contrast to Hagar, the text’s central figure, in terms of age, but more importantly also draws a distinction from the earlier common scripting of small, quiet, foot-bound women smuggled into Canada as Oriental wives. Even at seventeen, Sandra appears articulate, cosmopolitan, and occasionally irreverent, much like Hagar’s own liberated granddaughter, thereby challenging clichéd notions of Asianness by being seemingly Canadian herself.

While Laurence’s intervention is perhaps the most well-known, other much earlier challenges to stereotypical representations of Asians were made by two writers of mixed Chinese and European ancestry: Edith Maud Eaton (1865-1914) and Winnifred Eaton Reeve (1875-1954), whose pen names were, respectively, Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna. Both were daughters of

Grace Trefusis, a Chinese medical missionary, and Edward Eaton, an English businessman, trader, and artist. Both lived in Canada and the United States of America for certain periods, with Edith spending time in Montreal and Hudson, New York, before settling back in Montreal during her last years and Winnifred moving to Chicago from Montreal in 1895 and then relocating to Calgary in 1917. Edith and Winnifred Eaton have been claimed as literary ancestors by American and Canadian writers of Asian ancestry. More important than their nationality, however, is their Eurasian identity, which, as Lien Chao suggests, had a significant impact on their literary production (“Anthologizing” 146). Their choice of pseudonyms—Sui Sin Far for Edith, which is a Chinese name, and the Japanese-sounding Onoto Watanna for Winnifred—demonstrates, as Amy Ling asserts, the sisters’ intent “not so much to cloak their English patronym but to assert and expose their Asian ethnicity” (21). Sui Sin Far means *Narcissus* and symbolizes, for the Chinese, “dignity and indestructible love for family and homeland,” making the name particularly apt for Edith’s recognition of her Chinese ancestry and her emerging “political voice” (White-Parks 26-27). That both, but especially Edith, introduced the subjects of Chinese immigrants and Eurasian experiences several decades before such voices could come out from the communities in both countries speaks to their insistence on articulating a narrative of self and place, especially of teasing out the multiple threads of identity, including those of gender, ethnicity, class, culture, and history.

James Doyle argues in “Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna: Two Early Chinese Canadian Authors” that while Winnifred may have been the more popular and commercially successful of the two, Edith is the more significant writer (55). The younger Winnifred was also more prolific, writing, among other books, twelve best-selling romances in the “sentimental and melodramatic idiom” (Doyle 50); more recently, in 2004, additional examples of her previously unknown or undiscovered work were located through renewed perusals of magazines in which she had

previously been published. Considered the first Asian American to reach a national mainstream reading audience (Cole 1), Winnifred published several novels between 1889 and 1925, most with Harper and Brothers, and many more short stories and non-fiction pieces in mass market periodicals such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, *Century Magazine*, and *Harper's Monthly*.<sup>9</sup> Her novel and short story titles such as *Miss Nume of Japan* (1899), *A Japanese Nightingale* (1901), *The Wooing of Wistaria* (1902), *The Heart of Hyacinth* (1903), *A Japanese Blossom* (1906) and "A Japanese Love Story," suggest her writing to be what Doyle calls "slight and sentimental," its Asian influences clearly borrowed from then-popular Euro-American narratives (54-55). *Miss Nume*, for example, mixes interracial romance, shipboard travel, and Japanese scenery. Her non-Japanese works included *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915) and *Marion: The Story of an Artist's Model* (1916), both representing the "new woman" (Doyle 55), a more emancipated character who paralleled Winnifred herself.

While Doyle suggests Winnifred exploited an "ethnically false legend about herself"—she was part Chinese, not Japanese—Edith emphasized her European and Chinese heritage, often exploring the many problems confronted by Chinese and Eurasian immigrants to North America. Edith's first short story, published in 1896, focused on Chinese North Americans and marks an important shift from her earlier subject matter of "humorous articles ... emphasizing the love adventures of European Canadian women" (26-27). Her 1896 "A Plea for the Chinaman: A Correspondent's Argument in His Favor," published in the *Montreal Daily Star*, argued intensely against plans by the Canadian government to increase the head tax levied on Chinese immigrants entering Canada. Additionally, her collection of stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, published by A. C. McClung in Chicago in 1912, includes what Guy Beauregard, in "Reclaiming Sui Sin Far," calls "guided Chinatown tours" (341), which allow Sui Sin Far the "possibility of *showing*

[Chinese Canadian culture to] manipulate the gaze in an urgent act of self-preservation” (346, original italics). In two stories of the collection, “The Wisdom of the New” and “Its Wavering Image,” Sui Sin Far acts as an auto-ethnographer. She introduces Chinese culture in terms Sauling Wong, in her discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, describes as “providing explanations on the manners and mores of the Chinese-American community from the vantage point of a ‘native’” (262). “The Wisdom of the New” and “The Americanizing of Pau Tsu” depict the specific challenges for Chinese wives in adapting to American culture and social customs. “In the Land of the Free” calls attention to discriminatory immigration laws which separate members of a Chinese family. Other stories from the collection show Chinese immigrants as victims of European American prejudices. Beauregard, in discussing the significant shifts that have occurred in Sui Sin Far criticism, claims that her writing opens spaces for discussions of “resistance in relation to the various forms of racialization that structure modern subjectivities” (351). Producing “different cultural alternatives,” her texts challenge “hegemonic attempts to ‘know’ the other” and “narrate the often violent containment of difference in sexual, gendered and racialized contexts” (351). “Its Wavering Image,” still very much in circulation, has one of the earliest positive Euro-Canadian representations of an Asian Canadian woman, Pan, who struggles with her bicultural identity before finally claiming herself as Chinese. The short story itself acts as a counternarrative to racist representations; it does so through Pan’s defense of her Chinese ancestry, heritage, and community against the unscrupulous Mark Carson’s intolerance and slander, and through the characterization of Pan as strong and virtuous, which defies then-prevalent assumptions about Asian women. Writing from inside out, Sui Sin Far’s texts are thus informed by an understanding of racial and cultural tensions, and become important precursors to contemporary preoccupations with cross-cultural relationships and contemporary art and politics.<sup>10</sup>

## ACTIVISM AND AUTHORSHIP

Apart from Kogawa's *Obasan*, Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, and writing by the Eaton sisters, few long fictional works by and about Asian Canadian women were published before the mid-1990s, this study's time frame. Xiaoping Li, in *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism*, states that the earlier group of Asian women who came to Canada as concubines and picture brides, or who followed their husbands after years of waiting in the homeland, had been largely "silent" (50), and, indeed, there is little written record of their existences from their perspectives. As Helen Grice observed of the situation in the United States, many of the women who emigrated were uneducated and illiterate (17), and this was likely the case as well in Canada. More detailed stories of early Asian Canadian women were only eventually told publicly by daughters or granddaughters (among these Chong, Goto, and Sakamoto) who became "writing subjects" after the feminist and Asian Canadian political awakenings of the 1970s. This development resulted in active political organizing by women of Asian ancestry; they were among the initial leaders and members of the first Asian Canadian youth collectives, and as editors, writers, and performers in radio and television productions, they contributed significantly to creative and community-based cultural production.<sup>11</sup> Central to this activism and artistic creation was a determination to revise assumptions in popular cultural discourses of Asian women as passive and powerless. A 1978 special issue of *The Asianadian* devoted to women articulated the intent to begin "the essential process of demystifying ourselves as Asian Canadian women, not only by questioning our mythical media images and hidden herstories, but also by giving expression to our creative talents and voicing common concerns, aspirations and frustrations — the thoughts and feelings which remained silent for too long" (Sugiman 2-3). The editorial explains

that “[f]or centuries Western culture has viewed Asian women through a distorted lens, creating two disparaging images: the vacuous, submissive, exotic sexual servant — and the vacuous, submissive, virginal domestic servant” (2-3). Calling on Asian Canadian women to erase the “geisha girl mentality,” the editorial also advocated that they examine “the various ways in which the rigid cultural traditions of our ancestors continue to stultify and subjugate us” (2-3). It invited a review of struggles against the oppression and exploitation that arises “not only out of racism and capitalism, but ultimately out of sexist ideologies deeply rooted in all Asian cultures” (2-3).

Another *Asianadian* editorial in 1985 reinforced the critical role women were assuming in the larger Asian struggle against negative racialization in Canada: “Within the context of socioeconomic class and race which determined the position of our immigrant communities, how do we, as women, begin to define our role? This is the central question facing us today” (Dhar and Sugiman 3). Such calls resulted in significant critiques of dominant representations of Asian masculinity and Canada’s racialized hierarchies of power.

A central and continuing concern in Asian women’s activism of the 1970s to the 1990s was deconstructing the oppression of these women, both physical and symbolic, not merely by racist and sexist policies but also by cultural discourses. Such awakening coincided with the spread of the women’s movement, with mainstream feminism helping raise Asian Canadian women’s political consciousness, since the 1960s saw an increasing number of Asian Canadian women enter universities where they were exposed to feminist ideas and to campus feminist groups (X. Li 52). This exposure helped refocus the struggle: Asian Canadian women activists realized that they must fight their own battles, and that the white middle-class women’s liberation movement, concentrated on women’s rights, was removed from the experience of racism that was central to the lives of women of Asian ancestry.<sup>12</sup>

The 1978 *Asianadian* editorial similarly differentiated the feminist struggle of the wider North American movement from that of women of Asian ancestry: “Faced with the complex relationships between sex, socio-economic class and race, how do we as Asianadian women fit into the North American feminist movement? ... As Asianadian women, we must analyse the roots of our own oppression” (“Editorial” 2-3). This alternative feminist discourse went beyond mainstream Canadian feminism in the critique of patriarchy and converged with the formidable theoretical discourse vigorously articulated by black feminist scholars in the United States, among them the Combahee Collective, Angela Y. Davis, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. Xiaoping Li acknowledges that these writers emphasized the notion that “racialized women are differently situated from white women and that their emancipation requires a political agenda that aims at eradicating the multiple forms of oppression imposed upon them” (54). In Canada, a similar politics emerged, with many women, including Dionne Brand, M. NourbeSe Philip, Lillian Allen, and Himani Bannerji, helping to articulate a feminist politics complicated by the interplay of such social categories as racialization, gender, class, and sexuality. As Bannerji suggested in 1985, “our political struggle ... consists of the production of images and accounts which we might call images of resistance” (147). Beyond identifying their multiple forms of oppression as women, this politics questioned the invisibility and problematic representations of Asian Canadian women, enabling them, including Asian Canadian women writers, to embrace their discursive power.

The expansion of the Chinese Canadian Writers’ Workshop into the Asian Canadian Writers’ Workshop in 1979, the latter organized by Vancouver community activists like Jim Wong-Chu, an editor, anthologist, and founder of *Rice Paper*, signaled significant literary activity. Among the results were the anthologies *Green Snow: Anthology of Canadian Poets of Asian Origin* (1976) and *Inalienable Rice* (1979) and support for writers like SKY Lee. Xiaoping Li argues that the

periodicals *Rikka* and *The Asianadian* encouraged community organizing and acted as a forum for Asian artists and writers and for protest against the distortion of history and the subjection of minority groups to discrimination. In the 1980s and 1990s, the circulation of critical discourses such as postcolonial theory and engagement with issues of racialization, representation, and globalization continued to support Asian Canadian consciousness. As Xiaoping Li suggests, these discourses marked a “collective Asian Canadian journey from being the unspoken and invisible ‘other’ to being speaking subjects” (79). They produced Asian Canadian women’s collective cultural projects such as *Jin-Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women—The Chinese Canadian Women’s Photo Exhibition* (1987) and two issues of *Fireweed*, respectively titled *Awakening Thunder*, 30: 1990 and *Rice Papers*, 43: 1994 (Li 55-56). They also ushered in a generation of writers that included Badami and Goto, who, in the 1990s were among students at the University of Calgary mentored by creative writing faculty like Aritha Van Herk and Fred Wah, and Lai, who studied there after she had written *When Fox Is a Thousand*.

## **LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ASIAN CANADIAN WOMEN’S WRITING**

The potential to transform knowledge produced through literature about Asian Canadian subjects is exhilarating, as the 1970s activism indicates. That transformation has since allowed for some shifts in the dynamics of discursive power. As noted in the following survey, narratives by Chinese Canadian, Japanese Canadian, and Indian Canadian women engage with both the acculturation processes and the larger adversaries of patriarchy, classism, and racism in the adopted country and ancestral homelands, repairing the damage done by static portraits of women that the majority culture and dominant discourses encourage and embrace.



Recent additions to Chinese Canadian women's writing, such as SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, continue Sui Sin Far's project of writing more empowered bicultural women into Canadian narratives and interrogating issues of self and place. More than half a century after Sui Sin Far, Lee, a member of the Vancouver-based Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop and a self-identified "lesbian feminist of Chinese descent ... strongly influenced by Marxist and postcolonial theories," expresses her complex politics in her novels and collection of short stories. Among these are *Bellydancer* (1994) and *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter! and Other Stories*, the latter co-authored with Paul Yee (1983). Her *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990) won the Vancouver Book Award for 1990 and was a finalist for both the Governor General's Award and the B.C. Book Prize. Lee's first critically acclaimed novel, through its contemporary narrator Kae Ying Woo, weaves fiction into historical fact, portraying her great-grandfather who migrated to Canada in 1892, her great-grandmother and grandmother, and other Chinese women who contradict dominant assumptions about them as mere "unidentified receptacles" defined by their marriages (Lee, "*Disappearing*" 42). In chronicling the history of a young dynasty of Vancouver's Chinatown, Lee also explores not only female power among the women in her story, including Kelora, the First Nations mother of Ting An who rescues Gwei Chang and continues his bloodline, but also the family's racial and sexual relationships in their struggle for identity.

While Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* addresses some of the central issues taken up in this study, it was published a few years earlier than my selected time period for this dissertation. I include instead Chong's *The Concubine's Children* (1994) and Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995), both published during the mid-1990s blossoming of Asian Canadian women's writing and both writing across cultures, negotiating a position from which to speak of an Asian Canadian experience. Lai's mix of fiction and folklore and Chong's of biography and social history offer

novel and nuanced perspectives and approaches, especially to discussions of genre and narrative style as part of literary representations of Asian Canadian identity.

Lai, of Chinese descent, was born in La Jolla, California, although she grew up in St. John's, Newfoundland, and currently resides in Vancouver, British Columbia. *When Fox Is a Thousand*, nominated for a Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award, tells intertwined stories of Yu Hsuan-chi, a poet in ancient China; Artemis Wong, a young woman in modern Vancouver; and the fox spirit haunting them both. Unlike Lee's and Chong's immigrant multigenerational family narratives, *When Fox Is a Thousand* fuses ancient Chinese mythology with contemporary Chinese diasporic realities, exploring racialization, gender, and sexuality as axes of identity.

While Chong also tells stories that gesture towards the difficult but liberating task of naming Chinese women's experiences in Canada, *The Concubine's Children* is an autobiographical/biographical account of her grandmother, May-ying. Chong's book, which won a number of awards, including the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction and the City of Vancouver Book Award, was inspired by her 1987 visit to her mother's ancestral village in Guangdong. It mixes social history with memoir, chronicling May-ying's journey from China to Canada and the family's life in the Chinatowns of British Columbia, and identifies their experiences of oppression based on both gender and ethnicity. It also explores the lives of family members who were unable to leave China and lived there through the Japanese occupation, the civil wars, the Communist takeover, land reform, and the Cultural Revolution. Much of this family history had been hidden from Chong, a third-generation Canadian of Chinese descent, who was born in Vancouver. Initially unaware of her grandparents' marginalized lives in early Canada, Chong had successfully developed a professional career prior to her writing of memoirs: from 1980-1984 she was senior economic adviser in Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's office. Celebrating

the contributions Chinese immigrants have made to a country that has not welcomed them warmly, but reluctantly allowed them to stay and make their way in life, *The Concubine's Children* is ultimately complicated excavatory work that breaks through the hundred-year enforced collective silence of the Chinese Canadian community and what Lien Chao terms the “double silence” of Chinese Canadian women (221).

If Maxine Hong Kingston, according to David Leiwei-Li, was the first Asian American woman writer “to enter the arena of national culture and arrest American public imagination” (44), Joy Kogawa, writing in the later half of the twenty-first century, brought Asian Canadian writing to prominence and stirred interest in and scholarship about the Asian experience in Canada. Having merited attention from the publishing industry, universities, and award-giving bodies, her *Obasan* (1981), based on a short story of the same name written three years earlier, is critically acclaimed, commercially successful, and deemed a significant Canadian novel. A retrospective narrative of the impact of the government’s internment of the Japanese in Canada, it called attention to efforts to institute reparation and was central to the Japanese Canadian redress movement that began in the mid 1980s (Kamboureli 43).

As important as *Obasan* is, it is a precursor text that falls outside the chronological boundaries of this study. I have chosen to examine instead Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field* (1998) and Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994). Both texts acknowledge the complexities of location—Japan and Canada—and are not as critically explored as *Obasan*, even though *The Electrical Field* also alludes to the internment experience of Japanese Canadians during the 1940s and 1950s and *Chorus of Mushrooms* to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War.

Sakamoto, of Japanese descent but Toronto-born and currently a Toronto resident after years of living in New York City, explores her Japanese Canadian heritage in *The Electrical Field* (1998). Her novel, which won the Commonwealth Best First Book Prize of 1999 and was a finalist for the Canadian Governor General's Literary Award, tells about Japanese Canadians living in a small Ontario community. The narrative focuses on the murder of Chisako Yano and her *hakujin* (white person) lover, but it is the circumscribed existence of Asako, Sakamoto's *Nisei* (second generation Japanese) narrator and the oblique references to the dire legacy of the internment that make *The Electrical Field* more than just a murder mystery or a psychological thriller.

More experimental in genre and structure than Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* celebrates Goto's cross-cultural identity. Goto was born in Chiba-Ken, Japan, and moved with her family to the West Coast of British Columbia and later to Nanton, Alberta. Her first novel, winner of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in 1995 and co-winner of the 1996 Canada-Japan Book Award, scrutinizes Japanese immigration and settlement in Canada, as her main character Murasaki/Muriel attempts to remember her grandmother Naoe, who is missing. Murasaki's efforts allow Goto opportunities for remembering historical suffering in Japan, examining the Japanese experience of discrimination in Canada, and exploring self-invention, as all three generations of Goto's women negotiate their identities in the crossings of social and cultural borders.

South Asian Canadian women writers are a formidable presence in Asian Canadian women's writing, but the group's earliest work of fiction, Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*, came out only in 1981, the same year as Kogawa's *Obasan*. Shauna Singh Baldwin, Yasmin Ladha, Ramabai Espinet, Shani Mootoo, Namjoshi, and Uma Parameswaran have since addressed the South Asian immigrant experience in Canada, especially the issue of violence against South

Asian women in diasporic situations. Although their fictional works frequently focus on cultural equality for women in the Canadian context of multiculturalism, this section will only discuss Indian Canadian women writers, with other women writers of South Asian ancestry mentioned in this chapter's Notes section.<sup>13</sup> Two important Canadian writers of Indian origin from this group are Namjoshi and Uma Parameswaran. Now living between England and India, Namjoshi taught from 1972 to 1984 at the University of Toronto's Department of English and has published extensively—poems, fables, and fiction—in India, Canada, the U.S., and Britain, engaging deeply with concerns related to identity, gender, culture, and rights. Parameswaran, currently residing in Winnipeg, Manitoba, has published many collections of fiction, poetry, plays, and academic articles, and has written and edited scholarly books on postcolonial literature and women-focused research. Her many contributions to the burgeoning field of South Asian Canadian literature includes her coinage of SACLIT to refer to that body of writing in *SACLIT: An Introduction to South Asian Canadian Literature* (1996) and *Quilting a New Canon: Stitching Women's Words* (1996). Her fiction, especially *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milkwet Bodice* (2001), tells of the experience of sponsored wives of landed immigrants, and rallies for social support and legal change in Canada for immigrant women.<sup>14</sup>

Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem* (1996) was chosen for this dissertation not only because, like texts by Chong, Goto, Lai, and Sakamoto, it was published between 1994 to 1998, but also because it engages Indian women's experience in both India and Canada and offers compelling opportunities for the scrutiny of genre, character, and language. Like Namjoshi and Parameswaran, Badami was born in India, in Rourkela in the eastern state of Orissa. She joined her husband in Calgary when he moved there as a graduate student, and studied creative writing at the University of Calgary; her master's thesis, *Tamarind Mem*, became her first published book. Set

primarily in India's railway colonies, Badami's novel is acknowledged to be partly autobiographical and tells the story of Kamini and her mother Saroja, the latter nicknamed Tamarind Mem because of her caustic tongue, as sour as a tamarind fruit, and her stature as a "memsahib," an affluent married woman. *Tamarind Mem* explores diverse relationships across generations and the expanses of psychosocial and geopolitical space, but especially those between mothers and daughters in a patriarchal India where women live marginally. Saroja's and Kamini's redemptions acknowledge the strength and survival of South Asian women, whether in India or Canada, even as Badami's novel itself testifies to a rich and varied South Asian Canadian narrative.

## LITERARY CRITICAL HISTORY

Asian Canadian women's writing is beginning to receive thorough and focused critical attention, as the proliferation of critical scholarship about it testifies. Such writing has been studied with works from other countries and writings by male authors. Guy Beauregard's 1999 essay, "The Emergence of Asian Canadian Literature: Can Lit's Obscene Supplement?," a foundational study in identifying an Asian Canadian canon, and his "After *Obasan*: Kogawa Criticism and Its Futures" (2001), explore texts by male and female Asian Canadian writers. In *Banana Bending: Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian Literatures* (2003), Tseen-Ling Khoo analyses Asian Australian as well as Canadian diasporic texts, and in *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography* (2008), co-editors Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn bring together a collection of essays scrutinizing texts by both Asian Canadian male and female writers. In *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993), King-Kok Cheung examines narratives by both Asian American and Canadian writers such as Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy

Kogawa. *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen* (2004), edited by Ty and Goellnicht, directly addresses the question of identity, exploring, as I do, self-representation by Asian North American subjects. Writers in that collection investigate an eclectic mix of Asian American and Canadian literature, including poetry, as well as films and photography by men and women, with two essays looking solely at writing by women of Asian ancestry—Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days*.

At other times, writings from particular cultural groups or artifacts are privileged; for example, M.G. Vassanji’s edited collection *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature* (1985) and Suwanda Sugunasiri and Michael Batts’ *The Search for Meaning: The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origin* (1988), offer criticism of writing solely by South Asian Canadian authors, as does Uma Parameswaram’s *SACLIT: An Introduction to South Asian Canadian Literature* (1996). I was unable to find books specific to IndoCanadian women’s narratives, so this obviously is a gap worth noting. In “Anthologizing the Collective: The Epic Struggles to Establish Chinese Canadian Literature in English” (1995), Lien Chao scrutinizes only Chinese Canadian poetry, prose, and theatre; and in “Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada” (2010), Lily Cho examines Chinese restaurants, using various documents to consider their presence on the Canadian landscape.

There are at least three comprehensive special issues of journals on Asian Canadian writing. One, *Fireweed*’s “Awakening Thunder” (1990), compiles only original poetry, prose, and images by Asian Canadian women. Another is broad in its approach: *Canadian Literature*’s “Asian Canadian Writing” (1999) interrogates works in both poetry and prose by male and female writers. A third, *Canadian Literature*’s special issue on “Asian Canadian Studies” (2008), explores Asian Canadian writing not only as a subject of study but also as a literary canon.<sup>15</sup> Coral Ann Howells’s

*Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (2003), which analyzes the many traditions involved in contemporary English-Canadian fiction, gathers eight contemporary Canadian women writers, but includes only two who are Asian—Sakamoto, who is part of this study, and Shani Mootoo.

With scholarly activity in Asian Canadian literary studies and its allied field of Asian America burgeoning, significant critical works have been published within the last five years. Some of these I have encountered during the revision process, but are important to this dissertation since they exist in dialogue with this study's central concerns of (re)presentation and repair. For example, Ty's *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives* (2010) inquires into the term Asian American/Canadian, suggesting instead "Asian global" to accommodate the various modes of agency, the diversity of affiliations, and the heterogeneity of identities within Asian communities. Significantly for this study, Ty engages with Asian and Asian North American subjects in a global frame and across multiple genres—novels, plays, and films—exploring, as I do, the mobility but also the displacement of these subjects and the gendered and racialized aspects of their transnational lives.

Roy Miki's *In Flux: Transnational Shifts in Asian-Canadian Writing* (2011) argues that Asian Canadian subjectivity resides in transactions between racialization and performance, and operates in the context of a rapidly transforming global politics. He suggests that the term Asian Canadian bears Canada's legacy of othering as evidenced in its past exclusion of Asians, the head tax and internment as two obvious examples. At the same time, he explores the term's potential in literature and culture to "critique as well as overcome the past" (xii), gesturing toward the (re)presentation and repair that I interrogate in this study. Miki's explorations of forgetting in *The Concubine's Children* and vegetable politics in *A Chorus of Mushrooms*, two texts included in my



analysis, demonstrate not only critical Asian Canadian reading practices, but also Asian Canadians as assuming a social and cultural identity. Published in the same year as Miki's study, *Transnational Poetics: Asian Canadian Women's Fiction of the 1990s* (2011) by Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, Belén Martín-Lucas, and Sonia Villegas-López examines literary work from the three Asian constituencies in Canada—Chinese, Japanese, and Indian—also considered in my study. Lai's *When Fox is a Thousand* and Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, in particular, are explored within the context of autobiography and history writing. The authors' discussions of the trauma of the internment in Japanese Canadian women's literature, of sexuality and the female body in Chinese Canadian women's writing, and racialization in IndoCanadian women's fiction offer a survey of the poetics and politics of Asian Canadian women's fiction and help anchor my more focused examinations of repair in five of these narratives.

Three studies published in 2012 have added to the critical discourse on Asian North American writing, especially on questions of identity, sexuality, and intergenerational memory. Despite its focus on Asian American literature, Christopher Lee's engagement with post-identity in *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (2012) informs and to a certain extent challenges my discussions of the complexities of Asian Canadian identity. Lee argues that identities can be conceived "as providing a form—a grammar as it were—for making sense of and representing the relationship between the subject and the social. Post-identity marks the breakdown of this grammar and unfolds as an inherent and integral dimension of identitarian thinking" (8). Through Adorno's lenses, Lee conjures in Asian American literature the relationship between art and reality, suggesting that art yields knowledge through its resemblance to the reality from which it was created; he concludes, though, that the strain of that art as both "product of reality and exposé of reality" allows it to "dissent," enabling the critic to "unravel the coherence of

the artwork in order to dissolve the congealing of content and form” to achieve the “redemption of semblance” (17). My study adheres to Lee’s assertion of the “primacy of the social” and the “formal conditions of the artwork” to inform studies on racialization and identity (17), but resists the notion that Asian Canadians are “post-identity.” Also published in 2012, Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu’s *Transgressive Transcripts: Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Women’s Writing* engages with feminist theories of the body, of sexuality as mediating national and transnational belonging, and of textual agency, in a study of Chinese Canadian women’s writing. Chapters focus on Larissa Lai, who is also included in this study, but also SKY Lee, Lydia Kwa, and Evelyn Lau. Fu’s assumption that their writing resists and repairs stereotypical representations of Chinese women complements my own conclusions about the liberatory politics and narrative repair of writing by Asian Canadian women, with their texts documenting their inheritance of struggle and histories of resistance. Mona Oikawa’s 2012 *Cartographies of Violence: Japanese Canadian Women, Memory, and the Subjects of the Internment* interrogates Japanese-Canadian representations of the internment through interviews with twenty-one Japanese Canadian women during the 1990s. Oikawa emphasizes struggle and resistance as she addresses intergenerational issues and probes memories, the inherent violence of the internment, and the attempt to articulate the racism of the incarceration, dispersal, and deportation, paving the way for my related discussion about similar issues in Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*.

More recently, Larissa Lai’s *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s* (2014), a reexamination of the contours of Asian Canadian writing, ensures recognition of the 1980s and 1990s, years that correspond to part of the period of my study, as critical to Asian Canadian studies. Lai engages with poets Jam Ismail and Rita Wong, as well as with Margaret Atwood and Dionne Brand, and includes one chapter on Goto’s *A Chorus of*

*Mushrooms*. Lai's book interrogates language and orality and decentres whiteness—a recently strong current in the field of decolonizing, transnational, and diasporic literary studies—through its engagement with Indigenous and other writers and activists of colour. My study provides background for Lai's, as it contends with stereotypical white versions of Asian Canadian womanhood. Like my study, Lai emphasizes the “possibilities for self-fashioning for histories of the present, in the present of 1980 and 1980s Canada” (x). Her theoretically sophisticated analysis offers rich discussions of political and cultural protest activities in the period under discussion and engages, as I do, with subjects such as feminism, anti-racism by coalitions of colour, and, more importantly, with theorizing and discussion of female Asian Canadian subjectivity in critical readings of stories and poems. In emphasizing subject construction in this body of writing, she suggests that the “subject itself is thrown into contention, and then variously (and always differently) reconstituted through collaboration, juxtaposition, active imagination, experiments in language, or an emphasis on relation that destabilizes the Cartesian altogether” (x). Her argument, articulated aptly in her question—“how do I (or we) make (or remake) things/events/texts/selves in order to be free?” (x)—anchors this dissertation as well, and both our concerns with literary representations of women's identity or subjectivity suggest much interest in the liberatory politics in a range of discourses, including Asian Canadian writing.

As these recent studies suggest, and with existing numbers of Asian immigrants in Canada surpassing those European-born and changing Canada's demographic, cultural, and economic formations, Asian Canadian writing is now very much an integral part of Canadian literature. The newly enlarged body of scholarship on Asian Canadian writing demonstrates how Asians in Canada, particularly women, are writing themselves out of invisibility and damage and creating new spaces for articulation of difference. My specific focus on repair allows me to join, elaborate

on, and extend these voices and understandings, and to contribute to discussions of transculturation and globalization as fields of critical inquiry in Asian Canadian women's writing.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES: "YOU KNOW YOU CAN CHANGE THE STORY"**

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My examination of the five writers' narratives and modes of (re)presentation and repair, particularly in correcting both absencing and misrepresentation of female Asian Canadian subjects, begins in Chapter 1, which considers Chong's *The Concubine's Children* and Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* as fictive familial and cultural life writings blurring the boundaries between autobiography, biography, fiction, social memory, and history, as they reinscribe Asian female and familial experience in Canada. This chapter, in also considering Chong's, Goto's, and Badami's writing as matrilineal, interrogates the authors' recuperations of domestic spaces as legitimate and sometimes heroic sites for conceptions of mother-daughter relationships and of meaningful womanhood that is dynamic and agential as opposed to static/passive and externally determined. The re-visionary power of these novels is multiplied because it centres on intergenerational and cross-cultural relations and the grandmother/mother/daughter triad that are predominantly marginalized in male-authored literature.

In Chapter 2, I explore Badami's, Goto's, Sakamoto's, and Lai's demonstrations of the power of transgressive female sexualities, with notions of transgressions examined within patriarchal and homophobic contexts. These texts celebrate Asian Canadian women as self-determined subjects recasting their bodies and sexualities on their terms, including, in the case of Lai's narrative, participation in non-heterosexual relationships, and show the writers revisioning of women of Asian ancestry in Canada, emphasizing subjectivities both gendered and doubly ethnicized.

Chapter 3 examines Asian Canadian women's texts not only as culturally hybrid, but also, as is the case with Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*, as storytelling that simulates what Susan Gingell terms textualized orality and textualized orature privileging immigrant female experience.<sup>16</sup> These fusions—of the oral and the written; of the East and the West; of past and present; of the mythic, the magical, and fantastic with contemporary reality—fictionalize myth that is woman-centered and make possible a reterritorialization of language through writing orality, including the mother-tongue and the vernacular.

The writers' linguistic practices and the ways in which they shift, retexture, and reinfect the dominant Anglophone culture's language, acting upon it to an extent that the writers' ancestral languages are privileged by techniques such as code-switching, are critical in signifying cultural difference. These strategies become the purview of Chapter 4 as it studies Badami's, Chong's, Goto's, and Sakamoto's movement between two languages, which Mary Louise Pratt suggests is the result of "a profound and productive dimension of bilingual verbal culture" (863), and of silence as a narrative and discursive strategy in Sakamoto's text. This chapter interrogates the juxtaposition of voice and reticence that demonstrates women's efforts to articulate their bicultural identities, with both speech and silence as modes of resistance and power rather than evidence of oppression.

Two recurrent subjects present in most Asian Canadian women's writing, Canada as a nation and the text as a home, are explored in Chapter 5. The chapter's first section examines Chong's, Goto's, Sakamoto's and Lai's (re)imagining of Canada as a nation and investigates their complex and often ambivalent attitudes towards their country of citizenship. Their rewriting of Canada corrects the false construction of Canada as utopian multicultural state by showing Chinese, Japanese, and Indo Canadian female ways of experiencing the "unhomeliness of the Canadian locale" (Sugars, *Unhomely States* xiii). Employing Caren Kaplan's application of Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari's *detrterritorialization* to feminist writing—a formulation of the original use of the term elaborated on and reinflected to refer to dislocation experienced by labour alienated from original forms of production—the second part of the chapter constructs Chong's *The Concubine's Children* as reterritorialized “home.” When detrterritorializations are constant, physical homes may be sites of racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, homophobia, and other damaging social practices; for Kaplan, therefore, reterritorializations and resettlements in other kinds of homes are crucial (“Deterritorialization” 364-65). Chong's fictionalized memoir offers a context for multiple detrterritorializations and an alternative strategy for reterritorializing; it becomes home as it helps define Chong's identity and location.

The concluding chapter summarizes the recuperative and revolutionary potential of the works in this study. In particular, it emphasizes why (re)presentation and repair are critical and the various ways in which these are enacted in the narratives. As counter-discourses, these stories inform political practice outside narrative and enhance collective understanding, paving the way for women of Asian ancestry and other similar minority groups to be accorded full membership in the social community.

Exploring these sister narratives in particular groupings, across various categories and through multiple chapters, highlights the multiple dimensions of representations of Asian Canadian women in a way that is more layered and complex than would be allowed in an examination of these texts individually. This structure also enables this body of writing to be presented not individually as separate units, but as a cohesive group of literary works, a family whose individual texts are related to and complement each other particularly in the ways they augment and correct master narratives.

In Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Murasaki, who migrated to Canada from Japan, struggles with difference, acknowledging that "life is hard in Canada, once you come to an age when you find out that people think certain things of you just because your hair is black and they have watched 'Shogun, the Mini Series' " (189). By the novel's end, however, she comes to terms with both blatant racism and her richly diverse intersectional identities. When Naoe, her grandmother, tells Murasaki that the tale Murasaki heard is "not the story I [Naoe] learned, but it's the story I tell" (*CM* 32), implicit in Naoe's assertion is a self-fashioning that repudiates the discursive silences and/or fixed narratives and assumptions related to negative racialization, ethnicity, gender, and age reproduced for her by her original or adopted cultures. When she says, "You know you can change the story" (*CM* 220), Naoe demonstrates that Asian Canadian women do have the power and the opportunity to represent themselves even within racist and sexist paradigms.

The stories in this study are forms of cultural and political survival, resistance, and power against those forces that attempt to silence, obscure, appropriate, and marginalize Asian Canadian women's experiences, subjectivities, and voices. These stories dismantle the homogenization that denies differences among women of various Asian cultural groups and encourages essentialist stereotyping that sees them only as racial and gendered Others to "White" men and women. From past erasures, discursive absences, and damaging misrepresentations, these stories offer alternative ways of seeing women of Asian descent in Canada and their experiences, (re)inventing their identities from their own specific and nuanced subject positions. Hence, Murasaki's call—"we have only come part way in the telling and the listening. We must both be able to tell" (*CM* 127)—emphasizes, as Goto and the other writers in this study do, not only the potential and possibilities of this (re)presentation and repair, but also the urgency for these stories to be told.

**WE TO ME: SELF, FAMILY,  
AND CULTURAL CONNECTIONS**

*Unless you learn, who will speak your name? .... I think it is the pain of no one knowing my name that drives me to write. That and the sense that I am living in a place where I have no history. Where all I am is surface and what is not reducible to a crude postcard dangled round the neck.*

— Meena Alexander, “Transit Lounge,” 640

In “Transit Lounge,” a chapter of her memoir, Meena Alexander describes thirty men in a Bombay airport, their names and destinations written in tags hanging around their necks, and connects this transit experience to her own experience of figurative homelessness as an immigrant poet in New York. This chapter explores gendered Asian experience rooted in migrations similar to Alexander’s, emphasizing the complexity of these movements, which are akin to an erasure of self and history. Such obliteration may assume an invisibility to the surrounding community: in Alexander’s situation, for instance, there was the difficulty of being heard and being published in the United States of America because her community could not recognize her experience as legitimate in the American context. This chapter thus acknowledges the need to reinscribe the self and family amidst such absence and dislocation, in the process recognizing Asian women’s voices and stories. For Alexander, the “pain of no one knowing my name” (640) becomes impetus for her writing; writing is synonymous with voice, the latter not necessarily understood in terms of



transcribed speech but as a metonym for self-identity, offering her opportunity to write herself into history.

Using either fictional (auto)biography or (auto)biographical fiction, matrilineal writing, and alternating first-person narration, the writers included in this study, particularly Denise Chong and Kerri Sakamoto, also stress connections between gendered self-figuration, family history, matrilineal affiliations, and the found ethnic community and national identities into which they are born and in which they are reared. Helen Buss emphasizes this relationship in *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English* by suggesting that “mapping” in such autobiographies “can be seen metaphorically as joining the activities of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. Language ‘maps’ both the self and the coexistent world” (9). While Buss may mean in particular spatial connections, these spaces similarly offer familial and cultural affiliations beyond the physical that are integral to one’s self-identity. Autobiographical subjects are not isolated; commonality with others, usually a non-hegemonic group, allows them to speak on behalf of others as much as of themselves. In “Autobiographical Manifesto,” Sidonie Smith acknowledges that the subject “positions herself expressly as a member of a group or community, an auto /ethnographer” (437), and many women and diasporic writers do embrace discussions of their families and communities before they are able to talk about themselves.

Chong and Sakamoto join many North American women writers drawn to forms of autobiographical writing, which could be simply defined as writing about their own lives, to legitimate marginalized experience as a mode of (re)presentation and repair. Noting how “in the social construction of literary hierarchy, autobiography has become a peculiarly ‘ethnic’ or ‘minor’ form,” David Leiwei-Li offers that “black writers entered the house of literature through the door of autobiography ... because black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than standard

histories” (215). With official histories usually slanted to privilege dominant perspectives, autobiography—clearly and inevitably subjective—becomes a viable form for previously obscured voices. According to Gillian Whitlock in *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography*, autobiography is “produced in moments and spaces in which subjects are ‘driven to grasp their positioning and subjectivity’” (6, quoting Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani), with this production particularly true when colonialism impacts subjects and when opportunities for self-definition are rich with instances of subjugation and powerlessness. Autobiography can be married to decolonizing practices, partly explaining the appeal of autobiography to Asian American and Canadian women writers when it thus establishes resistance and agency or, as Roy Miki would have it, “asiancy” against “products of white assumptions and biases ... confirm[ing] and reforc[ing] the systemic racialization process through which privilege and power has been maintained” (*Broken Entries* 104). Such writing then becomes a terrain of social dissidence within the contours of specific histories of oppression.

Because autobiography in its many forms and blendings with other genres enables minority subjects to speak from historical and social locations, it becomes a useful space for the (un)making of identities, as is the case with Chinese American Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975), Japanese Canadian Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), and Chinese Canadian SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1991). *The Woman Warrior*, advertised by Knopf as autobiography and classified by the Library of Congress as biography, has had huge critical and commercial success, winning the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for best nonfiction. Its subtitle “Memoirs” offers yet another classification, and the term is appropriate given the book’s mix of individual and collective memory as it draws upon Kingston’s own story and that of broader twentieth-century Chinese American experience. Like *The Woman*

*Warrior*, *Obasan*'s generic identity as simultaneously autobiography, history, and fiction is also blurred. When Shirley Geok-lin Lim states that *Obasan* is "a fiction which impersonates the discourse of autobiography while at the same time... mask[ing] the genre of autobiography" (301), she stresses *Obasan*'s imaginative mingling of fact and fiction, which stretches traditional definitions of the literary form.<sup>17</sup> Such categorizing is seen, in *Obasan*'s case, in the way it reworks representations of the past, in particular the treatment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, through a first-person narrator. Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, a feminist narrative about three generations of Chinese Canadian women, fictionalizes Lee's own experience through her narrator-character, Kae. In "Resistance and the Demon Mother in Diaspora Literature: Sky Lee and Denise Chong Speak Back to the Mother/land," Mari Peepre calls attention to the link between the author's and the narrator's names: "Kae" rhymes with "SKY," an abbreviation of the author's first names, Sharon Kun Yung, a naming that enables the text to be "a loosely autobiographical rendering of family and ghetto history" (91).<sup>18</sup> Partly autobiographical and partly fictional, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, like *Obasan*, is also frequently classified as a historical text and, according to Shazia Rahman, a matrilineal narrative (91) that actively revises received ideas about traditional mother-daughter relations.

This chapter's first section considers *The Concubine's Children* as *fictional (auto)biography*—Chong's telling of her and her family's story, with aspects of it imagined for maximum narrative effect—and *The Electrical Field* as *(auto)biographical fiction*, a novel recreating parts of Sakamoto's and her family's story, its fictional license apparent in imagined characters and introduction of conflict and events for dramatic impact. That borders between fiction and autobiography can be collapsed has long been posited; in 1957 Northrop Frye claimed that autobiography is in fact "prose fiction" because it is "inspired by a creative, and, therefore,

fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 307), while thirty years later in *The Canadian Postmodern* Linda Hutcheon argued that "to write of anyone's history is ... to fictionalize" (82). In the context of Frye's and Hutcheon's discussions, then, Chong's text, although autobiographically based, is a fictionalized version of relevant aspects of her family story. Sakamoto's can be interpreted as the opposite: it uses events from real people's lives, including Sakamoto's family members, as basis for a work of fiction.

*The Concubine's Children*, *Tamarind Mem*, and *Chorus of Mushrooms* similarly focus on family connections through the specific articulation of daughter-mother-grandmother relationships, as this chapter's second section suggests. Using multiple first-person voices or a shift from first-to third-person narrators in their matrilineal texts, Chong, Badami, and Goto join other Asian North American women who participate in current discussions about mother-daughter relations in Asian North American women's writing. Helen Grice notes that since 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* "has spawned a whole new sub-genre of Asian American fiction: the fiction of matrilineage" (35). The beginnings of such a tradition within Asian North American studies coincided with the simultaneous interest in the mother-daughter dyad by other feminist writers. In 1976, the year *The Woman Warrior* was published, among the influential feminist publications that appeared was Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.<sup>19</sup>

Like Kingston, other Asian American women writers engage with issues of maternity, especially as it is integral to female identity. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 1986 more than a decade after *The Woman Warrior*, attracted almost equal critical attention, with Tan finding her own niche in Asian American writing and the fiction of matrilineage. Several other Asian American women's texts engaging in the matrilineal debate and discussion include Chinese

American Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991), Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), Filipina American M. Evelina Galang's *Her Wild American Self* (1996), Japanese American Julie Shigekuni's *A Bridge Between Us* (1995), and Korean American Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997) and Patti Kim's *A Cab Called Reliable* (1997).

While Wendy Ho's study has provided critical scrutiny of the mother-daughter dyad in Asian American texts, Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu explores "synchronized maternal genealogy" in contemporary Chinese Canadian women's writing, particularly Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence* (2000). The maternal and matrilineage in Asian Canadian writing by women, however, remain understudied even if many texts by women of Asian origin in Canada up to the end of the 1990s yield material for studies of mother-daughter relationships, among them *Obasan*, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Ying Chen's *Ingratitude* (1990), Evelyn Lau's *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1995), and Elaine Mar's *Paper Daughter: A Memoir* (1999).<sup>20</sup>

In most, if not all, Asian cultures, women are the ones usually assigned the tasks of preserving family and found community culture. Canadian writers with ancestral roots in Asia assume the role of articulating vibrant, if contentious, Asian and Asian Canadian identities so that they may be the basis of communities for succeeding generations. Through fictional autobiography, autobiographical fiction, and mother-daughter writing, the writers under study have embraced a political and cultural project that not only (re)presents the family as critical site of struggle and survival for girls and women and recovers female voices through intergenerational narrations, but also repairs the cultural memory of Asian Canadians more broadly.

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## ON (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY, FICTION, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

*[W]riting autobiography both avoids self-exposure and attains a narrative stance closer to the fiction writer's: it is not her story she represents, but the story of others as she sees them.*

— Mary Jean Corbett, “Literary Domesticity and Women,” 255

Mary Jean Corbett’s “Literary Domesticity and Women” argues that several women autobiographers privilege others’ histories more than their own, bringing their self-representation closer to fiction writing, because of anxieties with “publicity and celebrity” (255). While Corbett refers to the memoir in more detail in her article, she also discusses family histories, an approach that blurs boundaries between private and public, and between family life and the publication of family stories. Such practice parallels Denise Chong’s and Kerri Sakamoto’s writing of self and family, and of culture and history, in fictional (auto)biography and (auto)biographical fiction, in particular Chong’s dual narration of the autobiographer and biographer and Sakamoto’s mix of autobiographical and fictional techniques. Although Anita Rau Badami’s *Tamarind Mem* and Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* also features elements of autobiography,<sup>21</sup> they will be scrutinized, with Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, as matrilineal narratives in the next section. Their inclusion of extended families and the matrilineage in their writing constitutes a serious challenge to the Western concept of the sovereign subject and their dual first-person voices of daughter and mother or of daughter and grandmother are critical in understanding stories from multiple generations.<sup>22</sup>

Referred to by Ellen Quigley and Teresa Zackodnik as replicating Confucian spiritual autobiography and as autobiography contained within “the biographical narratives of her

grandmother, grandfather, and mother” (Zackodnik 52),<sup>23</sup> Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* is, I argue in this chapter, an exemplification of fictionalized (auto)biography that is told through a narrator who is both writer and character. Her book’s story extends beyond her own—the parentheses around *auto* indicate that the narrative also includes the biography of others—to those of family members and, by extension, to the larger Chinese community in Canada. Chong also tells of critical moments in Chinese Canadian history through a mostly retrospective narrative that, while informed by memory and its lapses, is also informed by accounts of the racist and sexist operations of the Canadian state and the Anglo population.

Central to Chong’s narrative is an autobiographical “I” that divides itself into the narrating and the narrated subject, this dual narration marking her roles, according to Roy Miki, in *In Flux: Transnational Shifts in Asian Canadian Writing*, as “both writer and daughter,” but, as I would add, also as granddaughter since the book is perhaps more about May-ying than it is about Hing. This dyad distinguishes between the experiencing and reporting voices: one narrative approach tells Chong’s own story and the part of her family’s story that she has directly experienced, while the other tells the remainder of her family’s story within detailed social and cultural history.<sup>24</sup> Such framing emphasizes, for Miki, a “discourse of omniscience and realism”: the omniscient narrator is essential to maintaining objectivity and the “codes of documentary ‘realism’,” which allow readers to assume reliable history and “verisimilitude.” It also enables Chong to write not only her mother’s (and grandmother’s) life, but also hers, or, as Miki suggests, “to assume responsibility for the narrative unfolding of her own subject formation” (*In Flux* 101).

This unfolding begins with the Foreword, which is signed Denise Chong and adopts this first-person voice that is also employed in Chapter 1 and the later section of Chapters 11 to 14. The “I” in these chapters who finds family photographs in a drawer is clearly “Denise,” who speaks

from the instance of the book's writing and recalls her family history from Canada where she resides. "I had known all my life there might be relatives in China," she narrates (CC 3), suggesting not only the cross-border and cross-cultural trajectory of the story, but also her intimate connection to it. This personal, experiencing "I" who addresses May-ying as "*Po-po*," the "proper way," she says, to "address a maternal grandmother" (227) re-emerges in the final chapters. Unlike the first chapter, which tells of Hing's birth and of beginnings and discoveries, especially of the photographs which initiate this journey back into the family history, the later chapters detail disease and deaths, in particular her grandfather Chan Sam's cancer and subsequent demise in a Vancouver hospital basement and May-ying's eventual death in a car accident. Their departure ends their story, shifting the narrative closer to the present and to the next generation, as Denise notes her family "mov[ing] more and more to the rhythm of our own lives," and eventually to her own story, separate from her grandparents (257). "In the year of *Po-po*'s death," she writes, for example, "I made it as far as the provincial finals of a piano competition in celebration of Canada's centennial ..." (258). She later mentions visiting her childhood home in Prince George, "when I was working in Ottawa," a reference to her previous employment with the Prime Minister's office, and finding the cedar chest she notes in her Foreword as containing black and white photographs, each "intimate enough to be a powerfully suggestive voice from the past, but also distant enough to stir curiosity," the "only artifacts" of a previous generation (ix).

In the second to the last chapter, Denise rediscovers these photographs, which "had held [her] gaze as a child," now encased in an album. The final two chapters, narrated in Denise's voice, explore two recent visits to China, joyful reunions between both sides of the family, and visits with her grandparents' "paper daughters" in Canada, including a woman named Mary Ho who assumed the identity of a child, Ping, whom they had left behind in China. She gives Denise



two black-and-white photographs she told the immigration officer upon her entry to Canada she used to remember her parents (May-ying and Chan Sam) by. For Denise, the “quest into the past reached its symbolic end when these photographs came into my possession” (291). She put these into the family album and sent copies to her real Aunt Ping in China, acknowledging that recovering lost family history “gave the past new meaning” (292). Having gone full circle, with the photographs themselves symbolic of the family’s fluctuating fortunes in both China and Canada, Denise’s own narrative is complete. The brevity of her first-person appearance in the few beginning and final chapters is thus appropriate, putting into effect the concept title of Larissa Lai’s *Slanting I, Imagining We* with a self-erasure that emphasizes her grandparents’ and parents’ untold stories more than hers.

Narrated in the third person, the middle chapters—the bulk of the text—tell of family, especially of her mother, Hing, and of her grandmother, May-ying, who “had been one of the prettiest women in Chinatown. ‘It was a known fact,’ was how Mother put it. ‘Everyone told me, ‘May-ying is so beautiful.’ It was perhaps the most generous thing she said of her mother. While my grandmother lived, I was always to think of her as beautiful; I took it to be an absolute truth. Somehow I thought it made up for everything that went so wrong for her” (4-5). Denise’s intimation that these two females are the focus of the family story, that there was animosity between them, and that her grandmother’s existence was more broadly conflicted, sets the scene and provides context for the more detailed and necessarily fictionalized biographies of her family—fictionalized because she cannot have known the details of the conversations, feelings, and motivations that she narrates of her grandparents, aunts, and uncles in China and Canada, and her mother in Canada.<sup>25</sup> These middle chapters offer not only insight into the subjectivities of family members, particularly her grandparents’ whose minoritized circumstances are inseparable

from the larger Chinese experience in Canada during the early twentieth century, but also detail broader political and social histories. Whereas Denise is the narrated I, the experiencing subject, Chong, who assumes the position from which the majority of the story is told, is the narrating I, the reporting subject who detaches herself from her family's story. In these middle chapters, she does not claim familial affiliation with her relatives, referring to them instead as Chan Sam, May-ying or Hing/Winnie. Nor does she acknowledge affinity with their experience, her detached narration assuming credibility and authority as she provides an expansive tour of China's past and China's meeting with Canada at critical moments of Asian Canadian history.

Chong's work is important to the fractured temporalities of Asian Canadian writing because her narrative extends beyond her story to those of her family and culture, retrospectively incorporating marginalized subjects from histories of exclusion and privileging the multiplicity of these stories particularly from insider voices. Successful as a third-generation Chinese Canadian, her public voice tells rarely heard accounts of oppressed lives and often silenced Asian women, her public persona providing these counter-discourses integrity and legitimacy. Central to her repair of women's identities, Chong's second chapter includes a brief history of rigid and hierarchical gender relations in China, an important context for May-ying's story. Her third-person narration lends itself well to a discussion of Asian women's histories of victimization as she emphasizes the overwhelming preference for male children in China, a historical fact that persists today (Ramusack and Sievers 196-67), and practices such as foot-binding, concubinage, and prostitution that create and demarcate Chinese women's marginalized positions. With women from poor families like May-ying's destined to become "beast[s] of burden," Chong explains that "diminutive feet, the ultimate sexual allure, would have elevated May-ying into a social class where women were artful objects" and would have enabled her mother to sell her as a "childbride, [with] some

say over her future husband” (TCC 7-8).<sup>26</sup> Through May-ying, Chong explores concubinage and prostitution, which in different ways legitimate a man’s sexual access to more than one woman. Because she did not have her feet bound, May-ying was sold in China as a servant and resold as a concubine to Chan Sam, a man twenty years her senior. As Chong tells of May-ying’s transition in Canada into waitressing and then prostitution, the narrative likewise becomes detailed social history, drawing attention to the laws of survival and victimization that allow women like May-ying to be bartered at will by others. Chong notes that concubinage did offer certain protections or benefits to women, such as the improvement of their economic position or status, as Ramusack and Sievers also concede (xxviii), but like prostitution still resulted in an institutionalizing of the control of female sexuality. In telling this story, she presents May-ying not as her grandmother (indeed, she is not identified as such), but as synonymous with many Chinese and Chinese Canadian females, expanding her story’s reach.

The narrative focus of the middle chapters on May-ying’s and Hing’s experiences in Canada allows Chong to recover part of the complex and often difficult terrain traveled by all Chinese women migrating to Canada and their Canadian-born children, allowing her to repair the hegemonic Canadian memory of the nations’ past by telling of racist and sexist operations of the Canadian state and Anglo population, those usually excluded from master narratives. Writing about the historical trajectory from May-ying’s arrival in Canada in 1924 to approximately sixty years after that arrival, Chong demonstrates how economics and patriarchy in China, and institutionalized racism and sexism in Canada, bleed into domestic life and lead to an exploitation of women within their own families and communities as well as in the majority culture. May-ying’s experiences thus become representative of those of many Asian women in America whose labour, according to Patricia Chu in *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in*

*Asian America*, made the “difference between subsistence and the establishment of a more stable and secure life for their families and communities” (92). Her story, which is integral to Denise’s own story, represents the demoralizing and inequitable circumstances for early Chinese women immigrants to Canada.

Chong’s telling of her ancestors’ experiences also challenges Canada’s claims of celebration of multicultural difference, breaking through the hundred-year collective silence of the Chinese Canadian community and demonstrating how illusory the promise of the Gold Mountain was for Chinese immigrants like Chan Sam who left China because of political turbulence and economic need. Her impersonal narration prompts a reading of this section as an abbreviated Chinese Canadian history that reveals how extreme anti-Chinese hysteria—manifested, for instance, in the rhetoric of the “yellow peril”<sup>27</sup> that betrayed Western fears of East Asian mass migration and the economic impact of that migration in terms of standards of living and wages for EuroCanadians—made life in Vancouver’s Chinatown difficult. Retaining her omniscient angle, Chong distances herself from the present and adopts an earlier perspective to rehearse then prevailing racial stereotypes, particularly of the Chinese as “shifty-eyed, pigtailed Chinamen of the Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan movies”—which isolated them from EuroCanadian society (CC 16). She then reminds readers of depictions of Chinatowns as “dirty and disease-ridden, as centers of gambling and crime,” and of Vancouver as “a congestion of rooming houses, of unmarked doorways where lascivious Chinamen smoked opium, lay with Chinese prostitutes, fed on rats and enslaved white girls” (16). Finally, she explores the underlying hostility toward, and pervasive prejudice against, people of Chinese origin in Canada.

As Chong recognizes the subordinated female within Chinese families, inhibited by the norms of the wider community and culture, her narrative voice in chapters two to eleven also

reflects the self-consciousness of the authorial (grand)daughter whose goal is, for the most part, corrective: to examine those family stories from within and without and to articulate her version of the truth because, as she acknowledges in her preface, “I wanted to be true to the individual lives of the family” (xi). Such an agenda involves blurring the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. When Chong acknowledges that “the truth becomes a landscape of many layers in an ever-changing light; the details depend on whose memories illuminate it” and notes that “in the very act of writing a book, I myself bring another shading of truth” (CC xi), she suggests a fictionalization of parts of the family story to reconstruct it. *The Concubine’s Children* thus becomes fictional (auto)biography that mixes memory, research, and imagination to tell a compelling story at once personal and universal, its verisimilitude gripping in its rewriting of family and community history.

Chong enriches her story with details of her family based on interviews with family in China and Canada, especially her mother, and with meticulously researched social and political history that contextualizes the family’s struggles. What Chong notes in her Foreword as a prying open of a door held shut against the past (ix-x) calls attention to a retracing of the family history through letters, photographs, and narrated memories that could not possibly capture with accuracy or detail the actual stories behind them. As omniscient narrator in these middle chapters, therefore, Chong chooses to move into the consciousness of each of her characters, particularly May-ying and Hing, such that readers access their reconstructed emotions and intentions and hear their reimagined conversations. A telling example is a description of a reunion between Chan Sam and May-ying after she has left Hing with Chan Sam to seek her fortune in Nanaimo:

“Get in here,” Chan Sam said. He pulled May-ying through the doorway. She waited for a blow to come, but none did. Instead, he proceeded to lecture her.

“For a daughter to grow up without a mother’s care is to grow up no better than

a worm,” he said. He opened his lectures with whatever Chinese proverb he thought applied.

He was talking about Hing, of course. But to May-ying, ... his words stung her where she felt most vulnerable—in leaving [her other daughters] Ping and Nan behind in China.

Chan Sam saw her crestfallen face. He moderated his tone and tried a gentler approach: “*Ah* May-ying, if you are the one who can find work, then we should consider ourselves lucky. When I can find work, then we will both save for the day we can go home and take it easy again, when we can have the three girls together and be one happy family” (61).

Hing, who was an infant at this time, could not have remembered the details of this conversation to relay to her own daughter, and Chong’s own memories of both grandparents were scarce and “fragmentary” (x). Since Chong could not know the details of feelings, motivations, and conversations presented in this passage, she fills in the gaps, and her imagined encounters and dialogues help create more vivid characters and craft a more absorbing story.

Similarly, Chong’s references to her grandfather’s Chinese wife, Huangbo, their son Yuen, and May-ying’s two daughters left with Huangbo in China, could only have been recreated from someone else’s memory, most likely her Aunt Ping’s and her Uncle Yuen’s. Chong’s accounts of their struggles during the years of Japan’s occupation and Mao Tse-Tung’s rule are enhanced by research and imagination. In the book, their experiences appear historically contextualized and vividly represented with the immediacy of an imagined personal knowledge, including stories about Nan’s death following her assault by a Japanese soldier. Her discussion of how Huangbo prevailed over “an existence more like widowhood than marriage” (85)

demonstrates in a broader way the repercussions of both male Chinese immigration to Canada and Canada's restrictive immigration policies on the women left behind.

Limiting the self-narrating "I" to only the opening and closing chapters, Chong forms a cohesive picture of the lives of the women in her family and of others who struggle with reconciling cultural tensions, patriarchy, and racism. Their identities as survivors are continually constructed and mediated in the changing formations of China and later of a Chinatown community in Canada. The shifts between first- and third-person narration, and between fact and fiction, help readers to bridge her ancestors' past and her present and to understand the discontinuities of the immigrant experience. Her telling transforms *The Concubine's Children* into a representation of an autobiographer's familial others. It suggests not only the marked contrast between her experience and those of her mother and grandmother, but also that her story begins where theirs supposedly end. When Denise as first-person narrator acknowledges that "[a] mother's stories to her daughter ultimately stirred a feeling in me that the life we lead begins before, and continues after, our time" (292), she reclaims the stories of her maternal ancestors, articulating and developing gendered, racialized, ethnic, and national subjectivities as she creates connections between her story and those of others, and among her past, present, and future. Such closure completes her (auto)biography, but also extends it, alluding to varied trajectories of Asian women's minoritization, resistance, and agency beyond those of herself and her ancestors.

Like Chong, Sakamoto's repeated returns to Japanese Canadian history in *The Electrical Field* transform her novel not only into a narrative of self, family, and community, but also an act of what Hilde Lindemann Nelson calls "narrative insubordination" in relation to master narratives that have either "ignored or underplayed" oppressive details (8). Mona Oikawa's research on the internment in *Cartographies of Violence: Japanese Canadian Women, Memory, and the Subjects*

*of the Internment* confirms that in three federal government reports—*Removal of Japanese from Protected Areas: Report of the British Columbia Security Commission*; *Report of the Department of Labour on the Administration of Japanese Affairs in Canada, 1944-1946*; and *Report of the Department of Labour on the Re-establishment of the Japanese Canada, 1944-1946*—the harms done to Japanese Canadians during the Second World War were deliberately minimized and/or forgotten through historical and political representations that mischaracterized the basis for the process and homogenized Japanese Canadians, and through euphemisms that obfuscated its damages (15). With language critical to (re)constructing the event, encoded language in intragovernmental documents and notices posted in various incarceration sites diminished its horrors through misnomers such as “evacuation” and “relocation” in place of the actual “incarceration, enforced labour, dispersal, and the expulsion” of Japanese Canadians to Japan. Further, the federal government and its administrators’ use of spatial euphemisms such as “interior housing centres,” “self-support communities,” “sugar beet projects,” “road camps,” and “domestic service placements,” among others, conjured not the devastations of incarceration but the more acceptable images of “hierarchical work and living arrangements” (24). Additionally, two common Canadian narratives of the internment—of it as solely a wartime event and a “military necessity” due to Japan’s actions and of it as an unfortunate, but distant episode in the nation’s past—are contradicted by Oikawa, who notes their inaccuracies: the war in the Pacific was merely excuse for an “increasingly restrictive and punitive legislation” against Japanese Canadians that was enacted long before this war, in fact from the time of their immigration to Canada, and that continued both during and after the war. The incarceration is periodized as a single and isolated incident and relegated to the past, which for Oikawa further the forgetting of its long-term effects and sustain flawed narratives of Canada as tolerant and progressive (41-42).



In describing the sites of the incarceration, abandoned mining towns and decrepit buildings in British Columbia's ghost towns, R.H. Webb, lieutenant-colonel of National Defence, argued in a report in 1942 that what he called the "family system" would allow those incarcerated to "live better and *more freely*, and incidentally cut down the cost of feeding them by what they produce themselves" (28, original italics). While his statement masks how the federal government confiscated these families' properties and sold them to pay for their internment, what is even more damaging in this scripting is his obscuring of the loss of freedom and humanity this imprisonment entailed. Oikawa contends that these concepts are further translated into discourses of choice that imply the Japanese Canadians voluntarily moved to these sites after having been coerced to choose between this exile or repatriation to Japan: a 1945 Department of Labour document, for example, noted that "the evacuees have been free to make their own choice voluntarily" (28-28). Such constructs are critical to enforcing myths of Canada as benevolent, with its citizens supposedly allowed their humanity and given the freedom of choice. However, these constructs are particularly damaging to victims of the dispossession and dispersal because they contrast markedly with actual official references to them through phraseology such as "savages and degenerates" used in 1936 when their appeals for the right to vote were rejected. Nelson offers that damage from such discourses occur because victims internalize the hate and dismissal, altering their understandings of themselves. This *infiltrated consciousness*, along with deprivations of opportunity, requires a counterstory lest victims like those of the internment endorse accounts told in their place and non-victims believe the fallacies of those master narratives (21, original italics).

As a member of the Japanese community in Canada and as a recipient of first-hand accounts of her family's internment experience, Sakamoto refuses the misrepresentations and forgetting perpetuated by these master narratives, challenging that untold or distorted history by

writing an (auto)biographical fiction drawing on both memory and imagination. As with Chong's *The Concubine's Children*, Sakamoto's novel defines the author as a subject in relation to others; her narrative is not merely a telling of aspects of her life, but blurs the boundaries between the autonomous act of writing the self and writing of relational others, particularly members of family and cultural community. Sakamoto fictionalizes parts of her and her family's experience to rearticulate a version of the forced relocation, incarceration, and repatriation of Japanese Canadians and of a Japanese Canadian woman who survives amidst personal and communal damage. With the internment itself and master narratives about it effectively damaging the group's self-understanding, one internalized through oppression, Sakamoto's text demonstrates subjects responding to threats to their identity and works to effect narrative repair.

Her exploration of the impact of internment on the book's narrator, Asako, and the cultural activism and clamor for reparation on the part of her neighbour are culled from Sakamoto's memory of her, her family's, and her community's experience. She says in an interview that the silence around the internment was debilitating for herself and her family: "I grew up in the shadow of internment. I felt that history cast itself over the present because it remained perpetually unspoken. ... As a child of internees, I felt and witnessed its residual effects" (*The Electrical Field* 2-3). To Lauren E. Jennings, the internment experience would represent a threat to the internees' self-conception that would need to be met with some kind of stabilizing response. To effect this stabilization, Sakamoto translates their unspoken stories onto the pages of her book, capturing the silences around their experiences while simultaneously calling attention, from the survivors' perspectives, to the oppressions that mostly remained undocumented or misrepresented in official narratives of this history. Sakamoto argues that one of the residual effects of internment was to render her a "cultural pauper," deprived of family heirlooms that were legitimately her own.

This paucity led to her pursuit in her novel of familial and cultural connections and knowledge of her own location in her ancestral history: “this history has turned me into a collector, a fetishist of my own cultural heritage” (6). It provided the impetus for her to rewrite her family’s and community’s story into fiction through name and scene changes, descriptive detail, dialogue, and imagined events, rendering the experience more dramatic and emphasizing more strongly the repercussions of that experience.

In keeping with (auto)biographical fiction’s personal, familial, and communal imperatives, Sakamoto’s fictionalizing of her and her family’s experience involves transplanting the “huge, oppressive towers” of the “vast open hydro fields” in the suburb where she grew up into her book’s fictitious landscape. In that same interview, Sakamoto describes growing up in the “suburbs where those vast open hydro fields cut a swath through the landscape” and seeing “those huge, oppressive towers going on the distance. I walked past those fields on my way to and from school every day” (3). Noting the “odd connection” between this childhood memory and old sites of the internment camps after she visits them, she relocates a familiar terrain, and parts of herself, to her book’s pages.

Eiji, her narrator’s dead brother, also parallels the teen-age brother of Sakamoto’s mother, “a mythical, tragic figure” whose kindness, charm, and good looks, like Eiji’s, were part of family legend. Sakamoto remembers her mother constantly talking about a teen-age brother who died in the camps and notes that Eiji personifies, more than just her uncle’s appearance and personality, the tragedy of his death: “There was a photograph of him on our dining-room table. At family gatherings, I’d hear stories of his kindness, his winning charm, and how handsome he was” (3). As she acknowledges, “he became a mythical, tragic figure to me—all the more tragic because he died without a country, without a home. My uncle was the inspiration for the character of Eiji, although

in the book, his death has been completely fictionalized” (3). The story of Eiji’s death in the camps evokes the humiliating imprisonment and/or constant relocations to buildings previously housing livestock or to camps in old ghost towns in the mountains or to shantytowns hastily built by work crews, especially in the interior of British Columbia and the prairie provinces.

When Sakamoto refers to the thriving *Nikkei* community of Japanese migrants and their descendants along the West Coast prior to the war (18) and alludes to events following Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, which resulted in Canada’s designation of Japanese Canadians (Japanese nationals as well as Canadian-born children of Japanese parents and Japanese immigrants who were naturalized British subjects) as “enemy aliens” (21), she is telling her family’s story. Asako, her novel’s protagonist, is a fictionalized version of her parents and every Japanese Canadian violated by this injustice. Because of military fears about access to the Pacific and supposedly to safeguard national security (“Re-establishment” 24), all persons of Japanese descent, even Canadian citizens, were uprooted, some herded first into the Hastings Park Exhibition Grounds, which was converted into a temporary transit centre. Asako and Yano recall the harsh conditions experienced by thousands of families sent to work on sugar beet farms and by hundreds of men detained in prisoner-of-war camps, accused of disobeying and resisting authorities. Their fictional stories echo how real homes, businesses, farms, and other personal possessions were confiscated and liquidated without consultation with the owners, and how Japanese Canadians were prohibited from returning to their homes or were coerced into signing papers renouncing their Canadian citizenship and allowing them to be “repatriated” to Japan. Sakamoto drew from her family’s experience in these references and allusions; her parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents “were all interned in camps during the war” (“*Electrical*” 3). And suggesting in the interview that Japanese Canadians themselves in effect, “pa[id] for their own

incarceration” (3), she noted how her “grandparents lost the businesses they had worked so hard to acquire before the war, which were sold off by the government” (1).

Sakamoto’s appeals to personal and family memory result in her counterstory about the dismantling of Japanese communities and the erasure of their social and economic presence in Canada, but also, more importantly, about the considerable damage done to the Japanese spirit. In her novel, the deliberate forgetting engaged in by some characters recalls the apathy and resignation around the horror and humiliation of the internment. For example, Asako demonstrates her resistance to being reminded of the experience by reporting conversations with Yano about whether the hill near their home is named after the Prime Minister of Canada during the Second World War, William Lyon Mackenzie King, or his grandfather, politician William Lyon Mackenzie:

“You know who they named that for, don’t you?” Yano would ask, testing me.

“You know who that Mackenzie is, don’t you?” Each time I refused to answer, refused his little history lesson, but he kept at me.

“It’s not the same Mackenzie,” I said.

“There’s only one,” he said. “It’s him all right.”

I shook my head, then scurried ahead, but he caught up with me. “He put us in the camps, Saito-san. He’s the one” (*TEF* 156-57).

Asako’s discomfort with and disavowal of her community’s experience of the internment echo the reaction of Sakamoto’s own parents. Sakamoto claims that after reading about it, she herself “began to ask my parents questions that made them uneasy” (“*Electrical*” 2). As Sakamoto notes in that interview, “No one talked about internment—not the history books at school and certainly not

my parents at home. There was a collective silence among Japanese Canadians that had to do with a sense of shame, a sense that somehow they were to blame for their incarceration” (2).

Breaking this collective silence, Sakamoto renders the previously unspeakable on paper and alerts readers to the racialized terms of Canada’s social, political, and cultural institutions and to their devastating repercussions from the perspective of Japanese Canadians. Yano tells Asako, for instance, that

[i]f things had been different, if it weren’t for the war, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing. Pressing collars and cuffs all day, cleaning other people’s dirty clothes. . . . Same with your papa, sweeping up on that chicken farm. Your brother all those years. We’d be doing something else. Something important, ne. You too, Saito-san. All of us. We were too good. We were doing too well, so they had to set us back, didn’t they? (*TEF* 121-22)

This loss of the *niseis*’ “opportunity” and optimism (“*Electrical*” 2) is barely articulated in dominant discourses, but is felt by survivors, such as Sakamoto’s family: “My parents were teenagers at the time of the internment and I believe the experience affected their lives profoundly. My parents’ schooling was curtailed, and I believe their generation (called Nisei) lost its sense of possibility for the future. The loss of opportunity is difficult to quantify” (2). Sakamoto’s narrative repair partly involves, therefore, interrogating the notion that Japanese Canadians could do only manual labour and had not succeeded as immigrants to Canada.

In *The Electrical Field*, Asako embodies these losses; her first-person voice, which imitates an autobiographical “I,” seemingly speaks for her Japanese Canadian community and for herself as a woman. Asako, in her unmarried state and domestic drudgery, thus personifies the defeat and resignation of internment survivors like Sakamoto’s family. Her dependencies, her

internal physical and psychic struggles, can be traced back to her recurring nightmares of that experience and its losses, especially of her brother Eiji. Her emotional distress, in its worst forms, has magnified to extraordinary levels of complicity and culpability in the deaths of Eiji and her neighbours Yano and Chisako.

Through her description of Yano, Sakamoto recounts in part her own involvement with redress, lobbying with others to secure apology and restitution from the Canadian government. She notes that when she began to work for the movement, at first her parents “refused to attend the meetings I helped organize” (2). Yano’s reparation efforts in *The Electrical Field*, which parallel Sakamoto’s, are similarly resisted. His work is evident in the many flyers he distributes, with the words “*Redress the wrong*” in “letters fat and clumsy” advertising meetings he also organizes and that only a handful attend (*TEF* 162). Yano tells Asako, “I do what I can. . . . I work hard. Try to change things for us nihonjin. It’s important to try” (121). He raises the violence of past negative racializing and resists attempts to deny the internment’s consequences, his perseverance contrasting with the resignation of the many “others who tried, but . . . gave up years ago” (121). Sakamoto herself was witness to this apathy, defeat, and resignation, acknowledging, especially in reference to her parents, that “[i]t was the idea of being visible once again that was uncomfortable for them, even threatening” (2). She attempts to capture in *The Electrical Field* precisely this unease with the experience, years after its occurrence, and, through Yano, attempts her own narrative reparation.

Sakamoto’s self-erasure through fictionalizing minimizes those connections for readers unaware of Sakamoto’s personal and familial history, even if these parallels are critical to her writing of the story itself. Such displacement of the self is necessary to allow readers to focus on the collective story shaped by that moment in history, which Tomoko Makabe, in *The Canadian*

*Sansei*, considers the “nadir of the history of hostility and discrimination against [Japanese] Canadians” (21). Fictionalizing this story within a “whodunit”—a psychological thriller about a murder in a small Ontario community committed by an internment survivor haunted by the experience and actively seeking redress—also allows Sakamoto to imagine characters and events and to explore motivations, reactions, and the repercussions of the incarceration on the community. The fictional murders of Chisako and Spears by Yano, in part incited by Asako, emphasize how the violences of the past continue to haunt the present. They foreground Sakamoto’s real narrative, the unsettled lives of Japanese Canadians who still carry the burdens of those horrors.

Additionally, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, converting her family’s internment experience into a murder mystery replicates the murderous suppression of minority voices, while ironically calling attention to the layers of silences surrounding the internment. Sakamoto notes that the “legacy of the Canadian government’s policy of forced dispersal” is “a kind of cultural impoverishment for [her] generation ... [since] grandparents and parents were forced to relinquish the artifacts and rituals of their cultural identity” (2). Her response to this disenfranchisement is a story based on her family’s experience that interrogates the fissures in the reporting of the internment and subtly incriminates those culpable for its atrocities.

Unlike Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, which mixes both first- and third-person points-of-view, Sakamoto’s use of a single “I” narrator allows readers access only to one character’s perspective and assumptions about other characters. Asako’s unreliability as narrator furthers the mystery as her lies, forgetfulness, self-denials, and manipulations engender more questions than answers. Speaking through Asako, however, also personalizes Sakamoto’s story; the first-person narration is intensely intimate, and creates an apparently autobiographical voice through which Sakamoto herself might occasionally speak. When Asako ultimately chooses to



negotiate through her traumatized past, not stifling it but opening herself to a more strategic and liberatory way of living, this expansive vision promises transformative personal change. Asako's line near the beginning of the book summarizes for both Asako and Sakamoto the impact of the internment on both their families and themselves: "For I had long ago understood that you had to live in the midst of things to be affected, in the swirl of the storm, you might say. And once you did, only then could you be forever changed" (16). It is only appropriate, therefore, that Sakamoto dedicates her book to her parents, but also to the memory of her mother's brother, whose death in the camps profoundly changed their lives and gave Sakamoto purpose to write the novel.

Speaking through and for gendered, racialized, cultural, and ethnic Others, Chong's and Sakamoto's simultaneous reconstructions of culture, family, and self permit them to fulfill what Elleke Boehmer calls, in the context of postcolonial women's writing, a commitment to recognize the "specific textures of their own existence," reclaiming "half-forgotten histories" and "moments of unrecognized ... women's resistance" (227). Their adoption and/or adaption of familial (auto)biographies—displacing or fictionalizing the self as subject—affirms specific versions of personal, familial, and communal experience and validates stories which have been silenced, distorted, or devalued. As counternarratives, these stories work against existing counterfeit discourses and stereotypical representations that disempower and disenfranchise Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian Canadian women and their families.

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## REWRITING THE (M)OTHER

*There can be no systematic and theoretical study of women in patriarchal culture, there can be no theory of women's oppression, that does not take into account woman's role as a mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers, that does not study female identity in relation to previous and subsequent generations of women, and that does not study the relationship in the wider context in which it takes place: the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structure of family and society.*

—Marianne Hirsch, "Mothers and Daughters," 202

In "Mothers and Daughters," Marianne Hirsch calls attention to the centrality of mother-daughter relations to women's writing within Western European and North American traditions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her work echoes and expands on that of writers such as Adrienne Rich, who contends that because of the "eternal determinative dyad" of mother and son, mother-daughter relations are "minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy" (236). Scholarly writing by Hirsch and Rich, and in the Canadian context Di Brandt's *Wild Mother Dancing*, revalues the experience of mothering when it is liberated from patriarchal tyranny. Such writing similarly opens possibilities for exploring intergenerational female relationships in literature, a responsibility also eventually assumed by Asian North American women writers—Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng, and SKY Lee, among others—who, according to Wendy Ho, resist Eurocentric and cultural nationalist discourses with mother-daughter texts that "challenge [their] politics of domination" by writing about specific and contemporary Asian North American women's struggles (23, 21).

Like the familial (auto)biographies discussed earlier, matrilineal writing by Anita Rau Badami, Denise Chong, and Hiromi Goto (re)present Asian families, particularly the legacies of mother and daughter alliances and antagonisms usually ignored or trivialized in master narratives.

Their dual and multi-levelled narratives told in the grandmother's and granddaughter's voices, as is the case in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and in the mother's and daughter's voices in *Tamarind Mem*, emphasize these texts as significant lenses by which to explore the intimate lives of Asian mothers and daughters. Further, Badami and Goto, like Chong, explore specifically Asian North American familial configurations: alternative mothering beyond the traditional nuclear family model; mother-daughter relations in the context of the diaspora; and memory and inherited cultural chronicles in the search for and the recovery of the mother, which translates to the search for and the recovery of cultural roots. For Chong, Badami, and Goto, mothers as feminist models become significant parts of the matrilineal inheritance and, most importantly, a reimagining of Asian women in Canada which repairs scripts of negatively marked ethnic and female subjectivity.

Goto's narrative, like Chong's, tells of three generations of women, while Badami's tells of four; in this intergenerational telling, the women characters negotiate diverse forms of racism, classism, and sexism in Japan, China, and India, as well as in Canada. Unlike Chong's reconstruction of real-life generational relationships, anchored in specific socio-historical circumstances, Goto's and Badami's narratives are primarily fictional. These inventive representations allow for magic and fantasy and for metaphors and allegories to infuse characters' experiences. The migration history and status in Canada of the generations of real and fictional women in all three books also affect in critical ways the often conflicted relationships between the mothers and daughters. Chong's May-ying and Goto's Naoe are immigrants; their daughters Hing and Kay (Keiko) are second-generation Canadians or, like Kay, migrated to Canada at a very young age; and the granddaughters Denise and Muriel (Murasaki) are Canadian-born and live with their mothers and grandmothers in Canada. In contrast, Badami's Putti Ajji, Amma, and Saroja reside in India, and although Saroja's two daughters,

Kamini and Roopa, eventually move to Canada and the United States, Saroja remains connected with them only through letters, telephone conversations, and shared memories of the past.

In embracing alternative family economies that allow for extended kin to reside with the nuclear family, Chong and Goto not only challenge insular modern North American family models and the Western concept of the sovereign subject, but also foreground and endorse contrasting Asian family exemplars. Unlike the nuclear family model critiqued by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*—one married couple with children, hence, only one mother, with the husband as the significant force in the household (57)—stem households, those made up of at least two generations of related nuclear families, represent an important cultural norm in various Asian countries. Providing multiple venues for mothering, these families also allow their members to age and be cared for within the family environment. Chong's and Goto's narratives replicate these familial models by showing the roles the elderly females in the family play in childcare and in the education, especially cultural, of the younger generation who may often be distanced, physically and spiritually, from the ancestral homeland; they also show the younger members' care for their elderly relatives. With three generations of women in one household, Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* especially demonstrates how Naoe has more influence over her granddaughter than Murasaki's own mother. Badami's Putti Ajji may not live with her daughter's family, but she still forms a compelling proto-feminist model, empowering her granddaughter Saroja and, to an extent, her great-granddaughter Kamini. These relationships support Hope Edelman's observation, in *Mother of My Mother: The Intimate Bond between Generations*, of the "ambivalences" in grandmother and granddaughter connections in which granddaughters feel more aligned with their maternal grandmothers than they do with their mothers (9). Helen Grice also suggests that the grandmother is "the most important member of the household" in much Asian

Canadian women's writing, "clearly problematis[ing] notions of a unitary identification with the mother, as well as multiplying the images of 'mother'" (40). Her statement validates representations of Naoe and Putti Ajji who, more than their daughters, constitute the more significant maternal presences in Goto's and Badami's texts.

An examination of alternative mothering and relationships between mothers and daughters in Chong's, Goto's, and Badami's texts shows intergenerational conflicts partly due to differing values within the context of immigration. The matrilineal narratives' structure and strategies emphasize these variances and contradictions. Chong distinguishes between both perspectives, as noted earlier in this chapter, with a shift from the first-person voice of the (grand)daughter storyteller, into her third-person telling of her grandmother's and mother's stories. In Goto's and Badami's books, in contrast, the story shifts between the first-person voices of the (grand)daughter who is the primary storyteller, and the first-person voices of her mother or grandmother. All three texts assign the bulk of the resolution of the conflict to the daughter/granddaughter, who tells most of the intergenerational story from her angle.

Chong explores her relationship with her mother in *The Concubine's Children* by first acknowledging the tenuous relationship between her mother and grandmother, partly due to May-ying's negotiations of her bicultural identity and struggle with conflicting Eastern and Western values.<sup>28</sup> What Mari Peepre terms "cross-cultural tensions ... in a confusing, anxiety-ridden cultural border zone between two realities" (81), complicate what is already a difficult existence for May-ying, who has to select appropriate elements of both cultural worlds to make the best adaptation according to the demands of her social circumstances. Peepre, speaking specifically about the Chinese Canadian experience, explains that first-generation immigrants are "pulled back in time by strong ties to their heritage culture which has been characterized by a long tradition of

racial pride and a conviction that foreigners (*fan gwe*) are all barbarians; by an extremely oppressive patriarchal rule ...; by a deep tradition of Confucian belief and especially filiation, where obedience to the father or mother and the ancestor subsumed all individual needs and passions; and finally, by the importance given to ‘face’ and to the ability to ‘eat bitterness,’ to internalize grief and to remain silent in the face of trouble” (81). In *The Concubine’s Children*, May-ying’s separation from Chan Sam and frequent neglect of Hing, however, suggest her movement away from Chinese norms, in particular those that, in Orientalist discourses,<sup>29</sup> essentialize the Asian and Asian Canadian wife as rightly subservient, and signal an agency more common among Canadian women of European ancestry.<sup>30</sup> Inasmuch as her self-indulgent behaviour signifies her adoption of more egalitarian Western ideals, especially of initiative and self-determination, her refusal to posture merely as a victim allows her to break free of inhibiting cultural and familial ties.

Chong writes that May-ying’s tormented struggle between Chinese notions of meaningful motherhood and the EuroCanadian impulse to assert one’s own needs partly explains her contentious mothering. Details of May-ying’s disregard for Hing’s welfare make up a substantial part of Chong’s narrative. She describes the care packages May-ying sends to China for Chan Sam’s other family and her two daughters there, and the occasional valuable objects she buys for Hing, but makes it clear that these nurturing gestures are rare and contrast with a history of self-abuse and an initial loathing for her youngest daughter. May-ying claims to friends, for example, that “the labor was so bad...I wanted to give [Hing] one push with my foot,” not “car[ing] if she died” (55), and a friend of May-ying tells Hing that she “could have been killed” when her mother intentionally dropped her halfway down the stairs during the customary Full Month celebration (55). Chong asserts that May-ying’s early abandonment of her family to pursue a separate

existence in Nanaimo and her later daily spankings of Hing reinforce Hing's assumption of herself as unwanted. Hing's memory of being dressed in boy's clothes and with a boy's haircut to allow May-ying the pleasure of looking at a son whenever she wanted, is, for Hing, "proof of her mother's disappointment that she was not born a boy" (100). Chong also details May-ying's alcoholism, gambling, and affairs with men that leave Hing with the daily chore of emptying May-ying's vomit-filled chamber pot; running to the herbalists for ingredients to make her mother nourishing teas or soups; enduring long hours in gambling dens, "as much a fixture as her mother in those smoke-filled rooms, by day and night" (90); and feigning sleep when her mother is with a man in the bed beside her.

Michèle Gunderson argues that May-ying's behavior, which Hing sees as "weak, hypocritical and morally lax," and what May-ying perceives as Hing's "wilful, disobedient, selfish" nature, complicate an already conflicted mother-daughter relationship set against the marginalizing circumstances of poverty and racism (109). The narrative of their relationship demonstrates "the desire both to unite and paradoxically escape from a family whose members are divided physically, economically, and culturally from one another" (109-10). Indeed, Chong's representation of this contentious relationship shows how domestic and familial sites are often complicated by socio-economics, gender, racialization, and culture. In Chong's telling of their story, May-ying contests the Asian mother ideal, which mandates the preservation of family and culture physically and symbolically. She describes Hing being "shunted around from month to month between elderly couples and woman acquaintances whom May-ying hardly knew herself" (155), while she chases across Canada after a lover or moves around between dingy rooming houses. She quotes Hing's description of herself as her mother's "left luggage" (155), thrown "out on the road, left ... like a plant, without water or care" (230). Chong proposes that given May-

ying's psychosocially dysfunctional mothering, Hing becomes her own mother substitute: "I had nobody" (242), she tells her mother, asserting that "You didn't raise me. I raised myself" (230). Her resentment against May-ying, resolved only after May-ying's death, emphasizes the importance of a mother's emotional, spiritual, and social presence in creatively establishing and nurturing the homeplace and the community as spaces of survival and resistance for already embattled families. But as Chong demonstrates, Hing herself fails to recognize May-ying's distressed circumstances as she is forced to abandon two children in China and compensate for a neglectful husband and unsuccessful provider whom she didn't choose.

In noting the "harsh lives" of women like May-ying, Peepre suggests that their "frustration becomes a smouldering rage which is forced underground into silence and only later erupts into self-destructive behavior such as alcoholism and gambling (for May-ying)" (84). Peepre argues that only the granddaughter, Chong, can "finally give voice" to the "middle generation who has been bludgeoned into silence," by "speaking back to the matriarchal ancestors who so abused and oppressed the female line" (84). Her contention that Chong is unable to forgive "her ancestress so hideous" (84), however, differs from my argument that *The Concubine's Children* is an instance of narrative repair and reconciliation, particularly in Chong's acknowledgment of May-ying's other virtues obscured by familial history. Chong's counterstorying of the difficult lives of May-ying and other Chinese women in Canada, who were considerably constrained by limited choices, allows for less judgment and more reconsideration of May-ying as a respectable subject. I do, however, subscribe to Peepre's notion that the "burden of silence and repression must be lifted and the hidden venom...released, and the matrilineal history discovered, traced and related before the daughter can be freed—to become a speaking subject in the border zone she inhabits" (86).<sup>31</sup> Chong's matrilineal (auto)biography does free her



grandmother from possible misrepresentations, her mother from her traumatic childhood, and herself from an ignorance of the past, as she, the speaking granddaughter, explores her familial history while politicizing the complex historical, cultural, and social work of Chinese women in Canada who maintained the survival of their families in both Canada and China under conditions of liminality.

Chong initiates her mother's search for a more redemptive memory of May-ying not only by finding answers to what has been previously unknowable, but also by articulating through *The Concubine's Children* what had been hidden, distorted, or erased. Central to validating her grandmother's and mother's stories, those shrouded in secrecy, shame, anger, and guilt, is a trip to China she organizes in 1987 so that Hing can be physically united with Chan Sam's other family and her surviving sister, Ping. The book written after that visit critiques the family's assumption of May-ying's heartlessness, a perception that ignores her gendered, racial, and socio-economic realities in Canada. While May-ying's alcoholism, adultery, emotional immaturity, and abuse of Hing are freely represented in her narrative, Chong also delineates positive but often elided aspects to her character—her courage, resilience, and generosity—and reframes May-ying's outspokenness and narcissism as agency, justifiable given her struggle and resistance. To counter Hing's recall of her mother as abusive, Chong details incidents that demonstrate instead what Ty terms May-ying's "valiant maternal self" (*Politics* 51): despite the difficult times, she made sure Hing was "clean and well-groomed" (CC 126); she grieved at losing her second daughter, Nan; and she claimed to have "singlehandedly" (127) raised Hing. Recovering the "good among the bad, and pride among the shame of [her grandparents'] past" (292), Chong's quest into the past validates May-ying's existence. Her statements in an interview about *The Concubine's Children*—"When you write about the past, it survives as an act of writing. My grandmother didn't know her

place and her place didn't know her. The act of writing gives my grandmother a place in the world" (qtd. in Kumagai)—alludes to a repair narratively of May-ying's damaged reputation as it confers honour on her memory.

This search for history and legacy also compels a shift of perspectives for Hing, offering catharsis and a revaluing of May-ying as a mother. Hing realizes while in China that the house her siblings "cherished as a monument to her father" had in fact "been built on her mother's back, on the wages and wits of waitressing and the life that came with it..., that it stood for everything that had been so misunderstood about her mother, by them and by herself" (280). By including this commentary, Chong not only delivers her grandmother from a family history that cast May-ying as a villain, but also provides her mother with the opportunity to be delivered from the horrors of her past by returning to the root of her pain. Reconstructing her childhood memories through a new understanding of her mother's experiences, Hing reclaims what is central, valuable, and satisfying. She realizes that "she had ended up the luckier of her siblings" (285), and that knowledge bespeaks healing, reconciliation, and closure. Asked if her candid telling of family secrets was a betrayal of family, Chong answered that her mother's own words justified that journey into the past: "When my mother picked up the book and said aloud, 'I forgive my mother,' I knew right then and there, it was worth it" (qtd. in Kumagai).

Chong's project is similar to those of many Asian North American women writers who recover and rewrite women's histories and experiences. Chong was born in Canada, but her *Concubine's Children* takes her on a journey, literally and metaphorically, to the village of her grandfather's birth and to various Chinese and Chinese Canadian communities, resolving, as Teresa Zackodnik claims, "her search for origin and identification" (52). Her telling of the stories of three generations of women in her family, and especially how these women come to terms with

themselves and each other, recuperates the seemingly ruptured matrilineage, but also allows Chong to explore her Chineseness and reclaim it.

Hing's and May-ying's fracture and recuperation of the matrilineage is paralleled in *Chorus of Mushrooms* by Naoe's relationship with Kay, but the latter's rift is more explicitly culturally rooted, validating Grice's assertion that "mothering and daughtering [can] also become textual tropes for the diaspora situation" (45). As Grice elaborates, "the daughter's situation as a 'hyphenated' ethnic subject often alienates her from her mother, more rooted as the mother often is in the ancestral/'mother' culture. The daughter's differing social and cultural embeddedness often results in a barrier between mother and daughter which needs to be traversed in order to recover mother-figure and mother-culture" (45). Goto's Kay clearly validates Grice's argument; she is alienated from her mother, who remains traditionally Japanese, and from her mother culture as she attempts to assimilate in Canada. Noting how her daughter, "[her] little convert," has "forsaken" her "identity" (13), Naoe insists on calling Kay *Keiko*, the Japanese version of her name, emphasizing, therefore, the linking of names and culture. When *Murasaki*, Muriel to her mother, self-identifies with her Japanese name in the final pages of the novel, Goto also suggests that renamings, part of displacement, can similarly mark belonging.

Language is central to this tongued equation. Kay refuses to speak Japanese, with Naoe lamenting her daughter's loss of "the Japanese she spoke twenty years ago" (13). While Naoe knows English, she refuses to speak it and spends years mumbling in Japanese: "I mutter and mutter and no one to listen. I speak my words in Japanese and my daughter will not hear them. The words that come from our ears, our mouths, they collide in the space between us" (4). These language differences deny the intimacies of generational connections, and emphasize the distance, particularly in terms of cultural identity, mother and daughter have traveled away from each other.

The matrilineal chasm stems not so much from Kay's rebellion against a stifling maternal influence as from an attempt to acculturate. Murasaki's father explains that "[w]hen we moved to Canada, your Mom and I, we decided it would be best for our children if we let them slip in with everybody else. Sure, we couldn't change the color of their hair, or the shape of their face, but we could make sure they didn't stand out. That they could be as Canadian as everyone around them" (206-07). Unlike Murasaki, Kay devalues her cultural inheritance for what Ty terms her "successful assimilation" or "cultural invisibility" (*Politics* 165). She must physically and symbolically reject aspects and versions of Japanese ethnicity, including her maternal cuisine and mother tongue, to construct herself as Canadian and integrated.

The repudiation of cultural and generational connections is also evidenced in part through descriptions of food, as Naoe reflects on Kay's preference for Western cuisine and hers for Japanese delicacies: "Converted from rice and *daikon* to wieners and beans. Endless evenings of tedious roast chicken and honey smoked ham and overdone rump roast. My daughter, you were raised on fish cakes and pickled plums" (13). Naoe, by contrast, seeks comfort in occasional packages sent by her brother and sister-in-law from Japan to a post office box in Alberta that she keeps secret from Kay (19). Only her granddaughter knows of its existence; as Naoe says, "she brings the packages and we crumble the *osenbei* together in my narrow bed (15). Reminiscent of Naoe's ancestral home and country, these "mystery packages" include "plastic crinkles, crackers dipped in soya sauce, lightly fried, crackle crunch between teeth, and flat leather sea squid, tentacles twisted and wrinkle-dried so tough to chew until the ball, the socket of the jaw aches but the juices linger salt and sea. Tiny crocks of pickled plums, the brine so strong the mouth drenched with a passing thought and look! ... *Sake!*" (16). The sensual nature of the passage heralds Naoe's eventual renewal; celebrating in her "bed of feasts" (18), she and Murasaki smack their lips as they

drink, “covered in sheets of cracker” (18), but an irritated Kay yells at Naoe to “cut that out!” (17). As Murasaki explains, “Mom always ragged on her to cut it out, how rude she sounded, but it’s really appropriate to smack lips. It’s like a symbolic gesture of respect to what you’ve consumed—how truly wonderful it is to swill sake in your mouth, rolling it on your tongue, letting it drip drop by drop into your eager throat” (17). Clearly, Murasaki participates in Naoe’s cultural pleasures, with food in this novel becoming a mode of intergenerational connection between them.

With Naoe and Kay culturally “locked together perfectly, each pushing against the other and [having] nothing move” (CM 13), it is Murasaki in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, as it is Denise, the third-generation female in *The Concubine’s Children*, who actively reconstructs the splintered matrilineage she inherits. To emphasize the importance of this generation-skipping relationship, Goto’s narrative alternates between the first-person voices of granddaughter and grandmother, in sections labelled either “Naoe” or “Murasaki.” Their narrations are framed, however, by repeated italicized commentary from a narrator who appears to be an older Murasaki preparing to tell her and her grandmother’s stories. These italicized units also help structure the text; they introduce the next sections, conveniently dividing the book into parts and moving the narrative forward, with Murasaki’s assumed lover frequently insisting that she tell more stories.

Naoe’s surprising departure from her daughter’s home at age eighty-five, the physical absence itself a trope for a discursive absence, becomes a catalyst for Kay’s cultural rebirth. It is Murasaki/Muriel, however, who actualizes the transformation for her mother and consolidates her own conflicted identity, again through the medium of food. Using a cookbook, Muriel prepares miso soup and *tonkatsu*, and by eating this first Japanese meal in many years, Kay revalues her mother’s ancestral cultural legacy.

The meal also begins Murasaki’s rebuilding of the matrilineage. In her grandmother’s

absence, she sifts through Naoe's personal, familial, and cultural chronicles of wars, deaths, economic turmoils, and revolutionary changes that impinged on her choices and relationships, but also remembers the Japanese folk stories, myths, and legends she told, often revised to privilege the Japanese female and celebrate her power. The stories that Naoe tells Murasaki parallel those in *Woman Warrior* that Kingston's Brave Orchid narrates to her daughter Maxine. Wendy Ho says in reference to *Woman Warrior* that "[t]he visionary and mythic world evoked by her mother's stories does not seek to recover an immutable past; rather these stories recover the marginalized formations of cultural knowledge and resistance of those subordinated and distressed within racist and sexist ideologies, discourses, and institutions" (127-28). Validating Ho's argument, Goto's storytelling in the novel, like Kingston, does not recreate or even reproduce original Japanese cultural productions, but instead retrieves the silenced voices and obscured identities of diversely marginalized female figures. These narratives give Murasaki the legacies of the past, but also access to self, family, and culture. Whereas before, as a young girl growing up on the Canadian prairies, she struggled to reconcile her conflicting cultural inheritances, her relationship with Naoe helps resolve the dualities and contradictions of her Japanese heritage and Canadian existence. In the end, Murasaki takes ownership of the Japanese version of her name that her grandmother gives her and determines, like Naoe, to travel the world and find her place in it.

Murasaki's rewriting of her grandmother's personal history, animating her story with magical realism, is possible in a multi-levelled narrative in which she imaginatively shares narration with Naoe. Her italicized dialogues with an assumed Japanese lover who asks for a story promise the deliberate distortions and the spirit of imagination that mix with more realistic details about her family. The unreliability of both narrators and their playing with chronology make for a destabilizing of narrative reality. This stylistic departure from realism also alludes to the

unreliability of memory, which is similarly noted by Mona Oikawa. While Oikawa introduces the notion of strategic forgetting, she argues that memories of women may be riddled with gaps and built across time and space (122). Larissa Lai also recognizes representational strategies that might be less than realist, a “radical carnival” that Goto uses successfully to denote the “nonlinear, fractured temporalities of Asian Canadian literature because it is committed to the multiplicity of stories rather than to the singular truth of history” (*Slanting I* 34). In her imaginative telling of Naoe’s destiny, Murasaki continues Naoe’s storytelling and transforms her grandmother into a mythic, non-realistic figure, the celebrated Purple Mask. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, this rebuilding of the matrilineage involves Murasaki honouring Naoe’s memory and reinventing the history of Goto’s own grandmother, as Goto herself claims in her Acknowledgements, by bringing it into the “realms of contemporary folk legend.”

Badami’s *Tamarind Mem* also has a similar dual first-person narrative that allows for two competing versions of a family’s past in India. In Badami’s book, however, the narrators are mother and daughter, and while the daughter relates the first half of the book in italicized sections set in the present followed by non-italicized sections that recall the past, the mother tells the second part of the book in a similar past-present conversation. The mother, Saroja, resurrects fragments of her self and her desires silenced and lost in the patriarchal orthodoxies of her time and culture; the daughter, Kamini, reconstructs her childhood memories and her mother’s ambiguous stories from a spatial and temporal distance. Their conflicting accounts emphasize the way interpretation and point of view affect family history, and reinforce Badami’s goal of exploring the subjective nature of family memory, which she acknowledges in an interview: “I wanted to play with the idea that memory is insubstantial and subjective. How do we know which story is true?” (Badami, “Author Q and A”). Kamini’s memories, recalled as a child, come first

and attempt to make meaning of her family's social and gendered hierarchies and her mother's struggles. Saroja's versions, coming later in the book, explain those struggles and the choices she made from an experiential perspective. As with Chong's Denise and Goto's Murasaki, Kamini, the third generation female character, attempts to heal the ruptures in this matrilineal relationship; however, instead of making a trip, as Denise does, or preparing food, as does Murasaki, she attempts this rebuilding with long-distance telephone calls to her mother described in the italicized present-time sections of the book.

Badami establishes distinct and varied trajectories of Indian women's histories, oppression, resistance, and agency through four generations of mothers and daughters. Each generation exists in tension with the next, the conflict frequently about women's place within a culture that assigns it to the home, or about allegiances to the men in the family. Kamini's grandmother, Amma, is personally invested in her children's acceptable behavior, and believes both that "a woman's happiness lies in marriage" (159) and that submission to the family patriarch is requisite for womanly fulfillment. Kamini's mother, Saroja, however, is driven to actualize herself beyond wifedom and motherhood. "A woman without a husband," for Amma, "is like sand without the river" (158), so she insists on Saroja marrying a man the family has chosen rather than studying medicine to become an Ayurvedic doctor. This insistence on domesticity both rationalizes the exclusion of women from male privileges such as education and a career, and sanctions their inferiority and subordination; as Amma says, "[a] woman can read and study all she pleases, her words mean nothing after all. So why are you wasting your youth and our money? Get married" (158). Amma's view is an example of internalized damage to identity based on her limited experience. In reproducing and revaluing this experience, however, Badami effects narrative repair to women whose words and study have been devalued even by other women.



Amma's and Saroja's polarized ideals are best demonstrated in their use of the shadow to embody female selfhood. For Amma, "a woman is her husband's shadow ... She follows him wherever he goes" (214); for Saroja, however, "[a] shadow follows its body around, yes. But I am an individual who makes my own shadow. Sometimes this shadow stretches out longer than my body; sometimes it pools like ink about my feet. It changes, dances along behind the body, beneath its feet, in front and beside it, eccentric, erratic, moved by light" (214). Saroja's shadow, a subversive counterbalance to patriarchal mandates, sets forth a model of openness, strength, and possibility for females, and symbolizes Saroja herself, who is independent, spontaneous, willful, driven by self-awareness and sufficiency, and unafraid to transgress community and cultural norms.

Saroja's differences with her mother allow her a transformative connection with her grandmother, Putti Ajji, who is herself at odds with her daughter. As "the only person" with "any guts" in the family, her grandmother reinscribes female power for Saroja and becomes her heroine (171). Putti Ajji's husband keeps a mistress, but refuses to eat with the lower-caste woman, giving his wife the prerogative of charging a rupee for every meal he asks her to cook. She shows her granddaughter Saroja her fortune in coins, noting how "the old whore is deaf and alone, and your grandfather lives on my charity" (172), and claiming victory: "Think, think. ...Who is the winner? I have my self-respect, my children have a house and a father's name. The slut your grandfather visits has nothing" (215). Putti Ajji's use of the words "whore" and "slut" in reference to the mistress is not surprising—the naming is an attempt to diminish the woman who destroys her marriage and competes for her husband's affections. It similarly positions her as superior, at least morally, as it also makes her a participant in the oppression of someone akin to her in terms of gender, presaging her granddaughter's own extra-marital relationship. Her cunning and boldness

gain her a level of independence from her husband and respect from Saroja, if not from her own daughter. Following Putti Ajji's example, Saroja attempts to escape the rigidly hierarchical conceptions of women's place in her community. While she is forced into a loveless marriage and forego her desire to become a doctor, she later successfully transgresses the orthodoxy of female powerlessness in her Indian culture. In a more local version of Eleanor Ty's concept of "unfastened," of not being attached to "specific nations, languages, or religions" (*Unfastened* xxi), she becomes, eventually, by choice, a "gypsy," as she calls herself, and she "chart[s] out a pilgrimage around the country, a *jatra*" (265).

In Amma's disagreement with Putti Ajji's stance, noting the humiliation she suffered because of her mother, she calls attention to family and community complicity in female oppression: "What is the use of having a palace of a house, boxes full of jewellery, when your man is busy admiring another woman's charms? ... Those pitying looks from all our relatives. Poor children, they seemed to say, paying for their parents' sins. Nobody blamed Rayaru [Ammu's father], you know, the fault was entirely Putti's" (215). The shame, guilt, and culpability she assigns women when their husbands stray question a specifically female position on male infidelity, but also show women's marginality in a binary system of sexuality in Indian society.

Unlike Putti-Ajji's, Amma's, and Saroja's inter-generational conflicts, which stem from opposing positions regarding female selfhood, gendered hierarchies, and access to power, Kamini's conflict with Saroja is more personal. Her narrative acknowledges her childhood resentments: what she assumes to be her mother's preference for her younger sister, Roopa; Saroja's unrealistic expectations of academic excellence; and Saroja's lack of appreciation for Kamini's efforts. Kamini contends that "Ma was never satisfied with a mere 'doing fine'," demanding instead "brillian[ce]" (120); she tells Kamini that "[a]t least one child of mine should

get a chance to achieve all that I wanted. It is your duty to keep your mother's head high" (121). With Kamini's sense of invisibility and emotional neglect comes an overwhelming pressure to succeed, and she does, fulfilling Saroja's expectations for her with a move to Canada for graduate studies in chemical engineering. Her accomplishments—travel, social intercourse, intellectual pursuits, but especially autonomy and enlarged freedoms—are partly a result of her mother's own struggle and determined efforts to elevate Kamini's goals: "'It is good for a woman to be ambitious,' said Ma approvingly. Her stories had several messages—study hard, reach for the best, don't be brazen—and she never failed to point them all out to me" (126). Because Kamini has her mother's support and faces fewer cultural and generational restraints, she achieves what Saroja desired for herself.

Like Chong's Hing and Goto's Kay, Kamini repairs the ruptures within the matrilineage; the absence of the mothers, in Kamini's case spatially and temporally, offers space to reconstruct and revalue the past and appreciate the present. In dreams of "an awful blizzard" and "being buried alive in my burrow dying slowly from the cold," she is "jerked out of uneasy sleep" by an image of Saroja pulling her "away from the nebulous terrors of a nightmare.... And almost as if my dream had summoned it up, another of Ma's weekly postcards, bringing with it the warmth, the smells, the sounds of another country oceans away from Canada" (111-12). The psychosocial and aesthetic distance allows Kamini to filter her memories in chapters she narrates, to chart her and her mother's interior vacillations and vulnerabilities, to develop an appreciation and respect for her mother and her legacies of strength and resolve, and to reclaim a mother-daughter friendship despite the gulf in their locations.

Saroja now fulfills the role for Kamini that Putti Ajji fulfilled for Saroja, and in Kamini's parts of the narrative, she reinscribes the Indian mother as successful in her quest for personal

authenticity and agency. Saroja herself, in her own narrated chapters, claims freedom from the “manacles” of maternal duties and responsibilities: “I do not belong to anyone now. I have cut loose and love only from a distance. My daughters can fulfill their own destinies” (266). This release allows Kamini to move forward with confidence even as it allows Saroja the quiet contemplation of history. She compares herself to the “aged parents of yore” who “shuffled their memories like a pack of cards, smiled at the joyous ones, shed a tear or two at others. They shook their heads over youthful follies and thought quietly about the journey, yet unknown, that stretched before their callused feet” (266). Making peace with her past, acknowledging that “I too have reached that stage in my life where I only turn the pages of a book already written, I do not write” (266), she continues on the strength of the legacies she bequeaths Kamini to articulate the struggle from “there” to “here” and from “then” to “now” (266). She begins another journey more gratifying than the last, telling her stories in women-only compartments of the train, eschewing the familial and social bonds that had kept her tied to an identity and community. Her delineation of boundaries ensures connection and separateness, this balance necessary for their relationship and for rich and deeply satisfying lives for both as they move into the future, from Saroja’s patriarchal India and Kamini’s more egalitarian world in Calgary.

Grice contends that in works of literature that explore mother-daughter relations, “the search for the mother is often a symbolic search for cultural roots” and “the recovery of the mother” often brings about “the reconstruction of a matrilineage” (45). In Badami’s, Goto’s and Chong’s texts, the first- and second-generation women, the mothers and daughters, have ruptured relationships, and it is the third generation females, the granddaughters, who actively reconstruct the matrilineage and thus the cultural connection. Murasaki and Denise attempt resolution of the conflict through sharing of food and through traveling back to the ancestral homeland; Kamini,

Murasaki, and Denise all use memory and story to reclaim mother and mother culture, recovering themselves in the process.

Chong, Goto, and Badami demonstrate that reconstructing this matrilineage is crucial in fostering cultural connections with ancestral homelands, which in turn is critical to the characters' identities as Asian Canadian women. Denise's, Muriel's, and Kamini's awakening sense of matrilineal connection allows them to recognize and appreciate their ancestral heritage and other legacies. Grice claims that "the daughter's identity partly depends upon that of her mother, but also the other women she perceives as her foremothers" (57). She suggests that the mother in such texts not only represents "liberatory possibilities in the form of cultural fictions and myths of female selfhood which constitute part of the matrilineal inheritance" but also acts as "a female—even feminist—model," showing by example strength and resilience (48). Certainly, Putti Ajji figures as a powerful model for Saroja, and Saroja for Kamini, as does Naoe for Murasaki and May-ying for Denise. In Putti Ajji and her daughter Saroja, Badami revalues the Indian wife and mother, allowing them possibility amidst family orthodoxies, community norms, and patriarchal institutions. Chong, through May-ying, re-envision the Chinese immigrant mother as a heroic if flawed individual in her diminished social, economic, and historical contexts in Canada. Goto, through Naoe, recuperates the silent, culturally compromised Japanese grandmother, rebirthing her vibrant spirit across space, time, and history. By not homogenizing Asian mothers and grandmothers or essentializing notions of mothering in their work, Chong, Goto, and Badami reimagine such mothers and grandmothers, welcoming them into their textual spaces and locating their stories within the contexts of immigration and marginalization and the specificity of their own unique experiences.

Chong, Goto, and Badami also allow their female characters their own voices, significant amidst silences and misrepresentations: Chong by imagining her grandmother's motivations and responses and Goto and Badami by alternating first-person voices among their female characters. Oikawa writes that the 'silent' subject, particularly the 'silent' Japanese Canadian female survivor, must be critically examined in relation to a racializing by the Western gaze of domination, and vis-à-vis the speaking Japanese Canadian subject and the visibility of Japanese Canadian men (58). Beyond insisting on the falsity of the discursive construction of silenced subjects, and arguing that in her direct experience, marginalized people have actually not been silent, Oikawa also suggests that writing such as Chong's, Goto's, and Badami's can make people "listen"; their narratives, which can be thus viewed as counterstories themselves in their correction of scripts of the silent Asian mother or daughter, become a form of endorsed discourse, having gone through the publication process.

## CONCLUSION

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As familial and cultural (auto)biographies or (auto)biographical fictions, Chong's *The Concubine's Children* and Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* go beyond the personal to incorporate familial and collective stories of critical moments in Chinese and Japanese Canadian history, specifically, the Gold Mountain migrations, early Chinese settlement, and the internment of Japanese Canadians after 1941. With the autobiographer's conscious identity speaking only briefly in the text, Chong's narrative expands the subject of the self as also including family, community, and culture; it suggests that subjectivity is always intersubjectivity, and identity, therefore, must be relational. Sakamoto's narrative draws attention to the sometimes autobiographical nature of fiction; she uses

semi-autobiographical details and a first-person narrator, the first-person voice of her novel copying standard first-person autobiographical narrations. Both mobilize autobiography and cultural history to transform their texts into fertile terrains for explorations and reinventions of family, history, and culture. Their (re)presentations of these three do not only revise versions of official Asian Canadian history that may frequently exclude or parse over the government's racist and sexist operations such as the head tax or the internment, but also allow victims' and survivors' stories to be heard, the immediacy and credibility of these stories helped because they were personal, familial, and communal experiences. Such counterdiscourses are inseparable from the project of negotiating identity and location in diaspora and the repair of damaged identities.

In offering alternative images of Asian mothers and daughters through alternating voices and perspectives, Chong's, Badami's, and Goto's narratives emphasize intergenerational women's antagonisms but also renewed affiliations, and demonstrate how these alliances can counter patriarchal limitations. Each grandmother, mother, and daughter in these texts has an individual story within the cultural narrative, with Chong, Badami, and Goto recognizing in their (re)presentations of these intergenerational relationships the value of extended kinships which challenge the Western concept of the sovereign subject; the necessity of inherited cultural chronicles and of present understandings repairing those of previous generations; and the power of "foremothers" to elevate the notion of womanhood beyond community and cultural mandates, all critical to a narrative repair of Asian female subjectivity. Only with an acknowledgement of the ruptures between the different generations and the separate negotiation of identities can the Asian mother and daughter discover, in the distressing sites of conflict, opportunities for connections as women and begin their reconstruction of selves.

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**TRANSGRESSIVE SEXUALITY  
AS ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATION**

*[W]e are the current stock of narratives, and they us. We subscribe to a stock of explanatory scripts, plots, narratives, and understandings that enable us to make sense of—to construct—our social world. Because we live in that world, it begins to shape and determine us, who we are, what we see, how we select, reject, interpret, and order subsequent reality.*

— Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, 229

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic suggest that typecasting defines individuals' and groups' understandings of themselves, as well as others' perceptions of and relationships with them. Damaging "explanatory scripts" can be debilitating as they reinforce negative aspects of individual or group esteem and identity. Asian women in Canada, initially subjected to false assumptions perpetuated by Orientalist stereotypes, were further subjected to racist and patriarchal immigration legislation and informal instances of discrimination. As noted in the Introduction, part of this bias stems from master narratives that emphasized Asian women's hypersexualization, which a number of critical writers acknowledge; for example, in *Transgressive Transcripts*, Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu notes stereotypes of "inscrutability," "asexuality," and "hyperfemininity" long assigned to Chinese women in North America (2). Traise Yamamoto, in *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body*, also suggests that Asian North American women have in the past been "cast in an undifferentiated pool of Asian women whose (assumed or enforced) foreignness and physical exoticism promise a range of delights: Lotus Blossom, China Doll,



Madame Butterfly, Geisha Girl, Suzy Wong, Dragon Lady” (65). This myth of what Cristina Hidalgo calls the “erotic Oriental,” and Asian women’s objectification as sexual mannequins “imbued with an innate understanding to please, serve and titillate” (18), package them as heterosexual commodities.

Such eroticizing is also reinforced by prevailing stereotypes of these women as submissive and subservient, compelled to endure pain or hardship without complaint or protest. Mona Oikawa, citing Laura Hyun Yi Kang, offers that the Asian female is frequently a “recurring figure of silence, passivity, sexual mystery, exotic inscrutability in this tradition of mythmaking and identification” (57-8), and in her article “Asian Women Face Model Minority Pressure,” Malena Amusa states that, historically, Asian American women have struggled with conflicting sexual stereotypes that force many to straddle identities between “a seductive and treacherous dragon lady and the soft, lotus blossom character made famous by the century-old Madame Butterfly story” (Amusa), in which a Japanese woman kills herself after losing the American man she loves. According to Eliza Noh, the dualistic images of Asian women either as “hyper-sexualized and domineering, or passive and submissive,” combined with familial expectations, narrow the spectrum for Asian women’s sense of identity and self-worth and other groups’ perceptions of them (qtd. in Amusa). This broad misrepresentation diminishes their esteem and reinforces their oppression and erasure by the dominant culture, making obvious the need for narrative repair.

Such misrepresentation is more recently demonstrated by focus groups studying the proposed \$100 note released by the Bank of Canada in 2012; they were critical of the image of a woman of Asian descent looking into a microscope, and objected to what they saw as a stereotype that Asians excel in technology and the sciences. Within the context of this dissertation, the banknote as originally proposed would also have shown an Asian Canadian woman in a non-sexual and high-

status occupation, which negates common scripts. Yielding to what activists characterized as “racist” feedback from those focus groups, the Bank of Canada, however, had the image redrawn with what it calls “neutral ethnicity,” stripping the woman of her Asian features and substituting clearly Caucasian ones. While this gesture may be an attempt not to stereotype, as the bank justified its actions, the end result is a privileging of European ancestry. I join other Asian Canadian voices deeming the act a huge step back in its negation of the nation’s supposed embrace of multiculturalism, which could consider Asian Canadians deserving of the honour of this banknote feature in light of their long and legitimate presence in and contributions to Canada, both inadequately valued as this incident illustrates.

Kandice Chuh formulates Asian American critique as an “Imagin[ing] Otherwise” in relation to discriminatory statements, legislation, and practices, and Asian American literatures as “articulat[ing] the complexities of power and personhood in imagining and narrating relations to the nation” (x). In exploring the conflict at the 1998 Association for Asian American Studies annual conference which awarded the best fiction prize to Lois Yamanaka’s novel *Blu’s Hanging* (1997), Chuh notes the story’s negative scripting of Filipino men as sexual deviants and the controversy as emphasizing the “marginalization and exclusionary knowledge politics within Asian American studies” (2). Her project, *Imagine Otherwise*, is a response to such damaging stereotyping, and resists the idea of a uniform and homogenous subjectivity. She argues for a “subjectless analysis” that refutes stable and essentialist Asian American representations and involves solidarity and resistance, revisioning the other in ways not previously possible, especially against the norms of hegemonic discourse. Imagining otherwise thus parallels Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s counterstories as narrative repair. Counterstorying in this context involves adding to the discourse what Nelson calls “a better story,” more accurate and respectful of identities and experiences, or that which

offers “ethical interpretations of the various anecdotes” so that subjects are able to come to “a clearer, shared understanding of who they were” (5-6).

Negative scriptings of Asian women as erotic and powerless inscribe them as one-dimensional, their identities subordinated to those of men who exploit their sexuality. Resistance to these oppressive narratives is witnessed in revisionary projects such as Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, which repairs what Shannon Bell acknowledges are modern constructions of the prostitute body that polarize the female into either good or bad (2). Chong’s nuanced portrayal recasts May-ying’s prostitution as almost necessary given her personal struggles, situating it within the context of mother-work. As Denise Chong writes, “Her motive in these casual liaisons was mainly to help ease her financial problems, yet it was not prostitution in the strict sense of a simple, quick exchange of sexual acts for money. The men would generously pay a gambling debt here or there or give her money to ‘buy herself something’” (83). Contrary to common stereotypes, May-ying is not inherently hypersexual; she did not engage in prostitution immediately upon arrival, and neither does she do so merely on impulse. As Eleanor Ty suggests in *Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, May-ying “does not know any ancient sexual techniques, nor is she particularly servile, [and] she does not possess uncontrollable desires or inordinately strong passions; she becomes a waitress [and prostitute] only because of existing socio-historical conditions” (37). Further, Chong’s telling of May-ying’s story challenges what Patricia Hills Collins calls “the public/private dichotomy separating the family/household from the paid labor market” (58). While racialized women’s experiences of mothering and work are usually situated between such dichotomies as “oppression and liberation,” “family and work, the individual and the collective” (59), May-ying’s waitressing work, and the sexual exchanges that sometimes accompany it, can be understood within the context of family responsibility, and offer a more accurate narrative of an

Asian woman's work experience. As oppressive as it may have been for May-ying, such work actually has a social and familial function; the income she derives from it supports her families in both China and Canada. Further, May-ying evolves in the course of the story; replacing Chan Sam as the family's breadwinner, she gains independence and liberates herself from her unhappy marriage. Her relationship with her lover Chow Guen is partly built on her terms—she determines to live apart from him when in Vancouver's Chinatown (CC 138)—and demonstrates how sex outside marriage becomes for her transgressive sexuality aligned with choice and, therefore, power.

While the transgressions explored in *The Concubine's Children* lay the groundwork, this chapter most centrally considers alternative constructions of women's sexuality in Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*, Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*. Their (re)presentations repair the damage done to Asian Canadian women's identities by common narratives that see them as sexually submissive to men, and counter representations of sexuality that is only heterosexual and for the benefit of men. In part, like May-ying, the women characters in their books take on power through sexual behavior that crosses the boundaries of social convention. The first section explores Badami's, Sakamoto's, and Goto's reimagining of Asian women through female characters whose extramarital sex, voyeurism, and elderly sexuality demonstrate control, confidence, and resistance to social constraints. In the second section, Lai's characters, through queer sexuality, tell counterstories to those that construct Asian women's sexuality as serving only either masculine pleasure or heterosexual reproduction. These narrative reparations show Asian women defying orthodoxy and cultural preconceptions to redefine the possibilities of subjective agency and sexual bodies within transgressive contexts.

## TRANSGRESSING SCRIPTS OF THE SILENT, SERVILE, AND HETERO-SEXUALIZED WOMAN

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*[T]he ambiguities of the transgressive sexual body lead to processes that may dissolve, transform, and reconstitute senses of self, moral and body politics.*

— Hastings Donnan and Fiona Magowan,  
*Transgressive Sex: Subversion and Control in Erotic Encounters*, 393

Because culture impacts codes of sexual propriety, defining what constitutes sexual transgression is challenging. In *Transgressive Sex: Subversion and Control in Erotic Encounters*, Hastings Donnan and Fiona Magowan make connections among sexual transgression, morality, and self-figuration. With the experience of sex and sexuality frequently shaped through control and power, boundary-crossing sexual engagements offer insight into possible rearrangements of agency and reconstructions of identity (1-4). With female heterosexuality and monogamy traditionally presumed the norm in both Asian and Western cultures, women have been limited in the kinds of identities and stories they can assume and tell, particularly if both defy cultural mandates about desire and sexuality. In refusing to privilege only heterosexual relationships, Badami, Sakamoto, and Goto, like Chong, rewrite Orientalist and patriarchal narratives of hypersexualized and powerless Asian women. In Badami's *Tamarind Mem*, Saroja's extramarital affair challenges cultural norms that insist on sex as permissible only within marriage; it also repairs the scripting of Asian women only as men's sexual victims. Sakamoto's and Goto's narratives also resist notions of masculine-focused heterosexuality within marriage as women's only sexual identity, with Sakamoto exploring in *The Electrical Field* the unmarried Asako's voyeurism and repressed sexual desires and Goto celebrating in *Chorus of Mushrooms* Naoe's elderly sexuality. These counter-discourses dispute cultural presumptions about morality and attempt to interrogate and revise permissible sexual boundaries and

bodily engagements, while offering more nuanced, if more sexually radical, constructions of women of Asian descent.

In *Tamarind Mem*, Badami eschews traditional representations with a complex character whose female body fails to comply with the conventions of femininity and monogamy mandated by her culture. Saroja's rupture of Asian wifehood and womanliness, central to which are fidelity and subservience to spouse, is made obvious initially by her "tamarind tongue, never yielding a moment" (216) and later by her affair with Paul da Costa, an Anglo-Indian car mechanic. Her caustic tongue and "strategy of words to ward off the pain of rejection" (216) in her marriage betray her assertiveness and independence, which are themselves complicated by her later return to traditional women's roles when her husband, Vishwa Moorthy, a railway engineer, falls ill.<sup>32</sup> For most of her marriage, however, Saroja wields her sour tongue like a weapon against Vishwa, whose absence from his family for weeks at a time physically divides them and whose interiority and inaccessibility emotionally alienates Saroja. Referring to Vishwa as a "dried-out lemon peel whose energies have already been squeezed out caring for a sick mother, worrying about his sister, inheriting his father's unfinished duties" (216), Saroja acknowledges the "dislike that rages" through her upon hearing his voice or feeling his touch (213). She also complains of the yawning monotony of life with him, and begrudges him "his aloof, merciless cool" (216). Kamini justifies, to an extent, her mother's anger and rebellion: "perhaps Dadda was to blame for the person Ma had become. He shut her into rooms from which there was not even a chink of an escape. He himself had left again and again, and every time he came back, he needed to be readmitted into lives altered daily during his absence" (147). As Kamini then explains, a "chasm gaped between my parents, a hole so deep that even Dadda with his engineer's hands could not build a bridge to span it" (122-23). This abyss offers Saroja the licence to violate societal norms and assert her autonomy through her illicit relationship with Paul. As she

argues, “I will not beg for the affection that is due to me, his wife. Why even a cat demands a caress, a gentle word. Deprive it of affection and it will wander to another home” (216).

Saroja’s breach of expectations of exclusivity within a marriage raises issues of propriety and impropriety and interrogates the dynamics of power and sexual transgression. In her accounts in the later part of the novel, Saroja acknowledges “new rules to follow, fresh boundaries,” including the breach of class hierarchies, since Paul is, as she concedes, “on the social scale ... the same level as the servants, lower maybe, because he is without caste” (220). Paul’s attractive appearance, however, makes him the “exception” to the normally white, knock-kneed Anglos, with his “dark” skin, his “eyes bright green ... the black cat ... his muscles high on his back bunching and relaxing as his arms move” as Saroja watches him tinkering with the car (220-21). She attempts to conceal her relationship with him, with Paul frequently “creep[ing] onto the shadowy veranda ... like a thief” (229), but Kamini has vague memories of her mother absent from the family bed on certain nights when Saroja assumed her daughters were asleep. Only the nursemaid Linda Ayah verbalizes her knowledge of the indiscretion and cautions Saroja against it. Saroja’s control of the liaison, as she dictates its terms, demonstrates her domination of this relationship, rare for women in patriarchal India. She masks her infidelity not only because of its duplicitous nature and her betrayal of her marriage vows, but also because of the shame of fraternizing with an inferior: “I am after all a memsahib, and there is a distance to be maintained between us” (209). Her refusal of Paul’s plea to accompany him to England, Australia, or Canada, is, she claims, motivated by “duty” and “loyalty”—“I think of Roopa and Kamini, their soft skins smelling of milk, their heads so vulnerable. They hold me with their helplessness, they twine about me as tenacious as bougainvillea. I tell Paul that I will not leave my children” (229)—but it is also in fear of openly breaking the mores of the community. As she acknowledges, “I don’t want to cut myself off, become a pariah, have other

children who will be bastards” (229). Finally, her refusal of Paul is linked to the exercise and performance of her own power. Her affair was consensual, not coercive, but still defined by racial boundaries and the structural limits of class and caste, and her claim of racial and class superiority over Paul has lethal consequences. She tells him, “I cannot destroy my life for a half-breed man, a caste-less soul” (229), and this rejection, what Saroja describes as her “evil tongue reduc[ing] him to a pile of nothing dust” (229), results in his suicide. He hangs himself in the billiards room of the Railway Club (105-09), his blood tainting, literally and figuratively, the trappings of wealth and power signified by the Officers’ club and intimations of the hypocrisies of both the club’s members and of Saroja who belongs to this class.

Saroja’s complicity in Paul’s death exemplifies the oppression of the other on the basis of difference, but also demonstrates the complexity of her subject position. She is empowered enough to act on her sexual desire, the illicit relationship liberating her to some extent from her dysfunctional marriage, yet she is not exempt from the racial and economic disparities, moral dilemmas, and cultural codes that impinge on the affair. It is only long after the deaths of both Paul and her husband that Saroja finds deliverance from her position as oppressed wife and morally dubious mistress, resurrecting fragments of her self and her desire silenced and lost in the patriarchal orthodoxies of her time and culture. Now a liberated woman, an explorer of new realms, Saroja takes to the road and finds that the role of widow offers more potential and possibility than that of either wife or mistress.

In Goto’s *The Electrical Field*, Asako Saito, the main character, recasts the body of the Asian spinster, usually assumed to be asexual, passive, reclusive, and wholly devoted to family. Asako lays claim instead to a subjective agency and a sexuality that not only redefines her self worth, identity, and community, but also challenges assumptions about unmarried elderly women. Her self-narrative initially presents her as the domestic ideal in common scripting of Asian women; she is servile, self-



effacing, and wholly family-orientated: “I have my family to take after, you know,” she says, and “Papa takes so much of my time. Stum can hardly do a thing for himself. I have no time to be lonely” (TEF 158). Asako is characterized by Coral Ann Howells, in her article “Monsters and Monstrosity: Kerri Sakamoto, *The Electrical Field*,” as “the dutiful daughter tending her bedridden old father, ... the responsible elder sister to her brother Stum, and in her fantasies the beloved younger sister of her dead elder brother Eiji” (130), all descriptive of her filial commitment. Her awkward demeanor also translates to a timidity and tentativeness that may initially reinforce Orientalist assumptions of passivity among Asian women, and her refusal to get involved in the redress movement adds to an appearance of inertia and detachment. Of Yano’s efforts, for example, she says, “I had no wish to share in his anger, or to make others share in mine; to blame the government, the camps, the war, the man they may or may not have named the hill after. For what life did or did not give to me. ... My bitterness belonged to no one but myself” (110). Asako’s self-contained resentment not only masks an aversion to spectacle and public politics, but also denotes an apathy that could easily be equated with powerlessness.

Asako’s first-person narrative, however, gradually reveals an egotistical, scheming woman far from passive and altruistic as she wields power over the lives of those she loves, irrevocably changing them. Stum learns belatedly that on occasion she shirks family responsibility, neglecting their father, his diapers overflowing, “soaked in his day-old shikko” (191) and “the vomit crusted around his mouth” (191). Her dereliction of duty is also shown through her father’s eyes, “lolling and then locking on [Asako], with the same accusation Stum had held in his voice,” and she acknowledges her inattention while striving to understand it: “I struggled for some bit of memory of how this had come to be, how I could have made myself so absent” (191). Stum also proclaims her selfish, manipulating her family under the guise of goodness and generosity. “Is that what you think

of me? That I'm the monster?" Asako asks him. "'Why not?' he reeled. 'You'd do anything to stop me from having a life besides you and Papa. I can't even have a friend to myself'" (135). While Asako is clearly multiply marginalized as a single, elderly, Japanese woman in her Ontario community, it is also obvious that she is empowered, if somewhat perversely, in her control over her father's and brother's lives. Sakamoto's Asako then is not entirely Nelson's "respectworthy moral agent," but she is considerably humanized in this identity-constituting story; she is an individualized character, not a generic internment victim.

More significantly, when she constantly peers outside from behind her front window curtains, the gesture initially implying vulnerability and a metaphorical hiding from the outside world, she also betrays a voyeurism that contravenes the moral order of private spaces and marks her body as disreputable. This transgressive sexual pleasure repudiates reductive stereotypes of spinsters as either asexual misanthropes or bitter, dried-up old maids. Indeed, Asako experiences sexual urges and attractions, and acts on them. Her neighbours' daughter Sachi knows that Asako watches her with her friend Tam amidst the grass by the creek in what the newspapers call lovers' lane (162-63). Asako acknowledges this spying on intimate behaviors and the sexual gratification she gets from it: "The sunlight veiled by clouds, my skin protected from any harshness as I crouched. I could go dizzy watching them watch each other, waiting with them, holding my breath, not giving myself away. I could lose myself" (82-83). Through her voyeurism, she displaces her sexual desire, making this act a primary means of sexual satisfaction.

In addition to her voyeuristic fantasies and urges, she is also sexually attracted to others, certainly Yano, whom she constantly watches. Yano's wife, Chisako, recognizes this surveillance as Asako's sexual interest in her husband. Chisako first tells Asako, "You want to think badly of him. You want to think you can hate him, ne? ... You want to believe he would harm me." When Asako

does not reply, Chisako counters with, “You have feelings for him, don’t you? ...The way you wait for him to come out and walk with you every morning. It’s obvious, Asako, can’t you see?” (284). Asako also eventually admits to jealousy in connection with her dead brother, Eiji. She had been spying on him meeting a girl, and her reaction to that encounter, which is extreme, is to pretend to drown so that he must disengage from his female friend and come to her rescue.

Asako’s repressed sexuality, noted by Sachi and Chisako, and its attendant jealousy and possessiveness, has fatal consequences: Eiji dies from pneumonia after his attempt to save her, and Yano kills himself, along with his family, when he learns about Chisako’s infidelity from Asako. Asako uses Chisako’s confidences about her extramarital relationship against her by telling Yano, an act Yano deems unnecessarily cruel: “Why did you tell me? Why?” he says, and “I wish you hadn’t told me. I didn’t need to know. But it’s done” (235-36). Howells poses the question as to which act is more “loathsome”: Chisako’s infidelity or Asako’s telling (135). Clearly, while the infidelity may be more socially unacceptable, Asako’s telling has more catastrophic consequences, resulting in several deaths, and Asako’s own admission—“I had not given him [Yano] the comfort he deserved that day, the comfort I knew how to give; what I’d done was far worse” (*TEF* 286)—demonstrates her culpability, and the likely sexual motives behind this telling. She recognizes that she may have betrayed Chisako, hoping to create a breach in her marriage so she could possibly replace her in Yano’s affections, or to have Yano notice her, be beholden to her, or cleave to her in this instance of marital crisis.

Asako—an unreliable narrator, her own voice simultaneously concealing, revealing, and contradicting details about herself—exposes not only her crossing of limits, particularly of what is deemed private, but also how sexual desire can be an ambivalent force in transgressive contexts, creating uneasy tensions and damaging repercussions, but also opportunities for self-understanding.

Acknowledging her role in the deaths of Eiji and of Yano and his family, she claims a new sense of accountability and maturation that can only offer hope for the future. By taking responsibility for her actions, she comes to terms with personal and communal tragedies and learns to embrace love, not least self-love and familial love. Sakamoto's reimagining of otherness in *The Electrical Field* becomes not only a counterstory to the spinster as isolated, powerless, and asexual, but also an effecting of narrative repair of reductive stereotypes of Asian women.

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Goto provides a recuperation of the elderly Japanese Canadian widow as Naoe embraces a powerful political and sexual identity. Her political self-awareness, for example, is obvious in the novel's beginning through her first-person voice, as she describes condescending practices and her response to them, articulating in the process the racist and sexist constructions of the inadequacies, or lack of it, of not being young, White, Anglo-Saxon protestant and male:

Talk loudly and e-n-u-n-c-i-a-t-e. I might be stupid as well as deaf. How can they think a body can live in this country for twenty years and not learn the language? But let them think this. Let them think what they will, for they will. Solly, Obāchan no speeku Eeenglishu. (4)

Speaking from a position of liminality, Naoe offers an unsettling mockery of the majority culture's assumption that immigrants, particularly elderly ones, have a weak command of the dominant culture's language. Pretending to have limited English skills, she subverts and transforms language into space where she, not the hegemonic culture, governs the discourse: "[T]here is method in my madness. I could stand on my head and quote Shakespeare until I had a nosebleed, but to no avail, no one hears my language. So I sit and say the words and will, until the wind or I shall die. Someone, something must stand against this wind and I will. I am" (4-5).

Naoe's departure from her daughter's house signals this resistance, her action long delayed but a sign of her later independence and power. No longer the silent and servile elderly Asian woman of Orientalist discourses, she embraces the unknown, becoming, in an imaginative rather than a realistic representation, the legendary "Purple Mask" bullrider in the Calgary Stampede. Goto's reincarnation of Naoe as a bullrider offers her entry into an imagined community quintessentially western Canadian. Goto's description of Naoe's departure that winter night, with only her daughter's credit cards as she embarks on an exploration of her place in the world, repairs the damage done by racist, sexist, and ageist narratives. Despite Naoe's planned disappearance, for example, a local newspaper article lists her as a missing person, an aging immigrant liable to get lost in the blizzard and unlikely "to survive a single night" (88). Murasaki, the text's other narrator, initially imagines Naoe going back to Japan or going "ape shit" and "raving" (88), reiterating her grandmother's otherness not only in associations of her with less than human behaviour but also with inadequacy and failure.

However, Naoe's journey of discovery is ultimately a counterstory comparing her to a cicada, which as Ty suggests initially "lives through a period of obscurity and silence, but bursts into life at the end of the 'long pupa stage'" (*Politics* 164). Naoe tells Tengu, a truck-driver who picks her up on the road, that she has been "sitting safe for so long—if I don't move against the grain, I will certainly be stuck there forever" (145). The reader is given a fascinating glimpse of her mythical travels, one in which Naoe not only survives and remains sane, but also claims her rights to both her own and the dominant language, to creativity, and to what Miki might term a female Canadian "asiancy."

This burst of speech is simultaneous with a burgeoning sexuality that also challenges and subverts cultural preconceptions about the elderly. Walking among the long rows of beds in the family's mushroom farm in Alberta, Naoe, "her legs wide and peat water soaking, lay down in

puddles warm and glowing. ... her eyes closed, her hands floating on the water” (85). This self-stimulation for sexual pleasure ends in orgasm:

[She f]ollowed the bones of her ribs to curving flesh. She stroked her breasts, the soft skin of her nipples, pinched gently the skin puckering with sudden ache. Touched her own breasts as she would if they were another’s. Cupped them in her palms and held them like two hearts. Her legs stirred in the peaty water, the rich scent headier than any musk, any perfume. The soft wet mud kisses on her cheek, inner arms, the skin beneath her knees. Along her inner thighs. She left brown fingers of peat etched on her breasts. Her hands smoothed down, down, swell of belly, curving to her pleasure. Softly, softly, her hands, her fingers, the moisture, her ache, peat warm as blood, the moisture seeping into hair, skin, parchment softening elastic stretch of muscles gleaming a filament of light. Murmur murmur forming humming earth tipping under body swelling growing resound and the SLAM of breath knocked from lungs, beyond the painful register of human sound, the unheard chorus of mushrooms. (*CM* 86)

Naoe’s sexual reawakening is akin to a physical rebirth, refuting notions of the aging body as grotesque, or that which does not fit standards of classical beauty, which, according to Mary Russo, is “closed, static, self contained, symmetrical, and sleek” (55). Naoe’s reinvigorated youthfulness and sensuality are also witnessed in her eventual initiation of sex with Tengu: “She lipped the skin of his belly, tongue stroking, bit softly his tiny nipples. Kissed him softly on his brow, his cheek, his eyes. She lifted her pelvis ... the moisture in her hair, streaming down her face, breasts, moved her pelvis over him and tucked him deep inside. They rocked, slowly and gently, the water lapping around her thighs, ... she pressed and hisssss of breath released. She laughed” (188). In this scene as with that in the mushroom farm, Naoe negates depreciating and detrimental images of aging, especially of

infirmity and decrepitude, of mental deterioration and physical decline. She holds up instead the older racially marked body as able, active, and visually beautiful. More importantly, her sexuality transgresses assumptions of the elderly and the widowed as asexual or failing in sexual performances, or of the equation, as M. Brogan suggests, of sexual attractiveness with youth and good looks (42-45). Resisting internalizing sexual myths, she explodes what Belinda Kessel states in “Sexuality in the Older Person” are assumptions of the elderly as not having sexual needs, with Goto also battling the stigma against older people who acknowledge an active sexual life. Naoe rises above many who repress or minimize sexuality lest they, at their advancing age, be seen, according to Kessel, as “depraved” or “lecherous” (121).

Goto’s fantastic, mind-expanding representation of Naoe’s experience ensures that she cannot be reduced to a stereotype. It might then be said that, drawing on Miki’s notion of performing Asian Canadian gender identity, Naoe performs a liberated version of Japanese Canadian female identity in becoming a mysterious bullrider of legendary proportions adulated by crowds. She “gives bullriding a whole new meaning” (*CM* 217), as the first-person voice attributed to her describes her experience:

And I find it. I find it. That smooth clear space where the animal and I are pure as light  
as sound. Where stars turn liquid and you can taste sweet nectar in your mouth. The  
glide of the animal in your heart and in your lungs and the very blood of your body.  
Heat of the bull between your legs, riding on a crest of power. Tension and pleasure as  
fine as a silken thread. The moment of such sweet purity, it brings tears to your throat,  
your eyes. Makes your lips tremble. (218-19)

With phrases such as “crest of power” and “the bull between your legs,” and with references to trembling lips and “sweet nectar,” her imaginative conquering of the bull associates her with both physical and sexual power. Riding the discursive bull, a particular incarnation of the “living beast of

language,” however, makes Naoe’s “ride” in Canada remarkably rough, since she must navigate through a single correct grammar and a uniquely correct version of Canadian English.

Goto’s metaphor of a silken thread encapsulates Naoe’s stunning transformation. She is like the silk worm hatching from eggs whose larvae enclose themselves in a cocoon of raw silk, producing exquisite fiber that becomes exquisite textile (217). She awakens to promise and possibility: “There are things I haven’t experienced yet. Moments of joy I haven’t allowed myself to live. I don’t want to die before I’ve ever fallen into my flesh or laughed myself silly” (76). She moves the minoritized, often ignored and obscured, elderly ethnic immigrant back into the visible centre, and as Ty argues, “[s]he confronts the abjection and otherness of minorities, the aged, and women, by refuting traditional expectations of them and transgressing narrative conventions and literary boundaries. Her motifs of reawakening and rebirth reformulate Japanese Canadian subjectivity from a psyche based on the historical burden of suffering, betrayal, and survival to one that acknowledges the past, but finds possibilities in fantasy, boldness, and beauty” (155). Naoe’s gift, and Goto’s, lies in imagining and acting on the vision of Asian Canadian elderly women defying limiting and limited cultural understandings, effecting a narrative repair that is both corrective and augmentation.

Badami’s, Sakamoto’s, and Goto’s aggressive reclamation of the images of women of Asian origins allow for a rich spectrum of experiences that dispel sexual essentialism. Saroja, Asako, and Naoe negotiate, redefine, and challenge not only stereotypes of the marginalized wife, spinster, and elderly woman, but also the possibilities of sexual bodies at their transgressive limits. What results is a revalidation that imagines Asian women laying claim to power through their sexuality, unbound by the usual restrictions of gender, class, and culture.



## CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVITY

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*For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialistic culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance. ... She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship.*

— Cheryl Clarke, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” 128

In an interview with Ashok Mathur, Larissa Lai, a community activist as well as writer, editor, and critic, acknowledges the political concerns inherent in her first book, *When Fox Is a Thousand*. She claims “anti-racist impulses” in her narrative—challenges to what she defines as “the assumption that all characters are Asian unless otherwise specified”—but also transgressions of gender and sexual expectations. With many lesbian, bisexual, and gender-shifting characters, Lai’s book becomes what Cheryl Clarke suggests is an “act of resistance.” Lai herself claims that the impetus for writing her book was to “rediscover a selfhood that does not rely on either white and/or patriarchal expectations of what I/we should be” (Interview). Artemis, her main present-day character, embodies this project; as Robyn Morris suggests, “Lai propels Artemis towards a collision course with her past in order to question not only the negation of the female story in history but also the representation of Canadian women of Asian ancestry as silent, passive or framed by a privileged white, Western and heterosexual male gaze” (“Making Eyes” 79). Lai, like Badami, Goto, and Sakamoto, clearly writes against a history of Asian women as silenced and diminished by predictable stereotypes. Her queer counterstorying also defies the assumption of heterosexuality as the norm in patriarchal North America and resists narrow, racist, Western assumptions of Asian women as usually subordinated in heterosexual relationships.

Lai’s insistence that female sexuality is not inferior to or necessarily related only to male sexuality is similar to Badami’s, Chong’s, Goto’s, and Sakamoto’s, but what separates her

reimaginings of Asian women from theirs are her blurring of gender boundaries and her portrayal of Asian female sexuality as existing outside heterosexuality. Writing about a ninth-century Chinese poetess-nun, a young contemporary Chinese Canadian woman, and a fox who assumes female forms allows Lai to recognize what she describes as “stories in Chinese culture about women’s alliances, sexual and otherwise, just as there are in European culture,” pulling these associations up from beneath the surface like “water from a well” (Interview). Lai frames Asian and Asian Canadian women not according to Western standards and imperatives, but, as she claims, in validation of who she is, a self-identified lesbian feminist who thrives in the “power and romance of confrontational politics” (Interview).

One of Lai’s attempts to correct patriarchal views of women and to rewrite Asian women’s identities in *When Fox Is a Thousand* is her nullification of gender categories, her teasing out of the narrow configurations of masculine and feminine. Artemis, for example, cross-dresses to enter a local gay bar on men’s night, flattening her breasts against her chest, slicking back her hair and tucking it under a skull cap, and wearing boys’ clothes and shoes picked up from a vintage store, which gains her access to the bar, “packed and redolent with the animal smell of men,” her disguise allowing her to “invade[] a territory not meant for her” (99-100). This crossing between gendered sites is also demonstrated when Ming, one of Artemis’s female friends, is mistaken for a man at a firing range when they are both shooting at the outlined targets (189). The common assumption that guns and power can only be aligned with masculinity might account for the error, but it also responds to questions that Lai herself asks: “What does it mean for a feminist of my generation, having been raised to believe that women are as good as men and capable of doing whatever they can do, particularly in terms of work? As a feminist who grew up believing that to be free from sexism was to live and work as men live and work?” (Interview). Her plays with gender categories

thus only emphasize her recognition of women's power and question the privileging of masculine ways of living and working.

Lai's acknowledgement of ambiguous gender identities among Asian women goes back into history, when the poetess, another of Lai's narrators, describes an encounter at a teahouse in ninth-century China with a woman who is effectively disguised as a male travelling scholar. The unemphasized shift from masculine pronoun to feminine noun—"he stepped into the tub and called to me" to "Slightly distorted by the water in which it was immersed was the body of the *woman* with the lantern" (55, my italics)—signals the ease of this gender slippage. The poetess had long known the frequent visitor as male, and the revelation of the stranger's actual gender "overwhelm[s]" her, but also draws them together in one of Lai's many representations of woman-to-woman coupling: "The smell of sandalwood and steam rushed into my lungs as I smoothed it over her shoulders, her chest into the soft space between her breasts ... my blood roaring in my ears. I bent over the tub and kissed her. She pulled me into the water" (55). The fluidity of these passages suggests an effortless stepping outside of the conventional gender boxes, the provision of many opportunities to cross boundaries, and the free imagination of what constitutes sexuality and sexual identity, all forms of narrative repair.

Lai's challenge to enforced heterosexuality also includes her making Fox a central voice in the novel. Pilar Cuder-Dominguez, Belén Martín-Lucas, and Sonia Villegas-López suggest in *Transnational Poetics: Asian Canadian Women's Fiction of the 1990s* that Fox stands in for the "lesbian" (60), and while this assessment is reductive of the enormous role Fox plays in the book, Fox is, indeed, a marginal character who inhabits the bodies of dead women and uses them to participate in lesbian sexual relationships. Lai herself claims that in "deal[ing] with sexual representations of Asians in the West where we have been so much exoticized and/or desexualized in

a society which insists on pathologizing the sexuality of the other,” she was “compelled to find out what kind of warrior the fox could be in that battle” (151). She acknowledges using Fox as a “new trope of lesbian representation, or, if that term and its history reeks too much of its western origins, then as a trope of Asian women’s community and power” (“Political Animals and the Body of History” 151).

Because Fox has the ability to become human by entering corpses of girls dead before their time and breathing life into them, she generates stories about desire and sexual politics, one of which initially appears to be a heterosexual romance, but becomes an exploration of lesbian sexuality. Assuming human form, Fox assists a housewife in seducing her husband to regain the affection he has lavished on his concubine. Fox wraps the wife in the colours of the sky before a storm and the scents of roses, orange blossoms, and jasmine, and teaches her that kisses “come not from the mouth, but from a well deep below the earth” (5). Her methods are successful; as Fox concludes, “[t]he husband was smitten. Is it my fault if she ran off with the concubine?” (5). The concubine’s replacement of the husband in the wife’s affections affirms female connections, and suggests that relationships between women, including sexual pleasure, can be equally or more gratifying than those between men and women. Additionally, as the authors of *Transnational Poetics* also suggest, these female liaisons present the women as parallel to each other, avoiding the more polarized domination and submission systems of traditional heterosexual relationships (61). The Fox and the poetess, indeed, tell multiple counterstories of women from a thousand years earlier who challenge traditional roles (wife, concubine, courtesan) in China through lesbian relationships, and these narratives repeatedly present women as aligning with one another, sexually or otherwise, and are continued in present-day accounts of female relationships.<sup>33</sup>

These passages, revolving around Artemis, negate social ideals of sexuality that preclude anything but a penis-vagina pairing to the exclusion of all other sexual possibilities. In her exploration of a sexual encounter between two women, Artemis and Claude, a third-person narrator presents lesbian coupling as instinctive, natural, and deeply satisfying:

What happened next was something that often happens after open-hearted confessions. It started with warm breath that became a kiss. A kiss that became gentle hands, breasts and bellies, a rhythmic walking into the sounds of the night. The walking became something much more aggressive, something greedy. Fucking the way horses or other large creatures fuck, Claude's many broad fingers inside Artemis' hollow, sucking cunt and the wind outside wailing. There was something about the largeness of it that was gentle. Their bodies filled the room. And somewhere, at a low level like a sound so deep you can't hear it, there was a violence that traveled from one to the other as surely as violence always passes between those who love each other. (147)

Their sexual coming together is spontaneous, suggesting that these relationships are inventive, complex, and complete. The women lovers in this book have conflicts, leave each other, and in the case of the poetess and her maid, perhaps one murders the other, suggesting that the reconstruction of Asian Canadians as agents does not necessarily mean an idealizing of these agents. Their associations invoke passion and uneasy tensions, with consent and demand, vulnerability and domination integral to them. Lai also constructs these relationships as purposeful and consensual; the response and reciprocity, the violence and transgressive contexts, are seemingly critical to a culture of resistance.

As the authors of *Transnational Poetics* note, Artemis's "discovery and acceptance of her homosexuality" are critical to her own search for identity (61). That identity has broader political implications, as the description of her relationship with Claude reveals: "In the breath and in the

warmth that moved from hand to belly, history itself passed between them. Impossible that they should be here like this, in this place where they were meant to compete for white people's attention, for white people's money and knowledge. They talked about it as a defiance of gender and racial expectations, and this made their passion illicit and dangerous" (170-71). While lesbian relationships exist outside the heterosexual model, the woman-to-woman alliances in Lai's novel, such as Artemis's and Claude's, become compelling reflections of female creativity, with these relationships created by choice, not social conditioning and conventions. They contest gender and sexual oppression, and Lai's acknowledgment of this challenge is itself already resistance.

Lai's identity politics in *When Fox Is a Thousand* also involves calling attention to homophobic hatred and arguing for transgressions of heterosexual normativity and racialized limits on sexuality. Her explicit descriptions of heterosexual violations of five Asian women—in the High Court of the Underworld scene, for example, two women of Asian ancestry have been murdered, one because she was mistaken for a "[f]aggot" and "[b]umfucker" and the other because of her relationship with another woman (215-18)—emphasize their marginalized status in society with their violent and unwarranted rejection by both the dominant culture and their own communities. In referring to this "exclusion or execution," Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu, in *Transgressive Transcripts: Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Women's Writing*, proposes that these women are "respectively the victims of racism, sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, and class supremacy" (87). Further, he offers that, as Lai herself writes, these women have "to find another country to take [them]" (WFT 218) for them to escape the Underworld. Lai's "another country" is a "synchronic community" for "silenced women," possibly even Fu's "lesbian utopic site" (87) or "imaginary homeland – that accommodates the author's circumvention of the marginalization inherent in being a minority woman writer in the West" (88). It certainly is open space like *When Fox*

*Is a Thousand* that allows women like Lai opportunities to transgress borders and celebrate agency and creativity.

Lai's lesbian politics and poetics oppose social and religious norms that deny women sexual agency and encourage the breaking of stereotypes around Asian women's sexual orientation. In refusing the heterosexist notion that for a woman "to embrace sexuality of any kind was to relegate oneself to an inferior/oppressed space," Lai's narrative embodies what she calls "the power and the romance of confrontational politics because there is a purity in that refusal to back down, that refusal to take shit, or to compromise" (Interview). Nullifying gender categorizations, challenging sexual and gender boundaries through lesbian relationships, recognizing multiple forms of female sexuality as valid, and presenting a positive image of what she terms the "culture of women identified women of Chinese descent living in the West" (Interview), Lai demystifies the figure of the lesbian Asian woman. Her *When Fox Is a Thousand* repairs conceptions of identity in terms not only of racialization and gender, but also of sexual identity, and her counterstorying offers alternative versions of female experience and sexuality among women of Asian ancestry in contemporary Canada.

## CONCLUSION

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Badami's Saroja, Sakamoto's Asako, and Goto's Naoe engage in sensual and bodily pleasures that disrupt Orientalist stereotypes of the Asian woman as often sexually victimized in heterosexual relationships. Their sexual transgressions—an extra-marital relationship, sexual voyeurism, and elderly sexuality—are contingent and dynamic, appropriating and reversing cultural stereotypes that deny women sexual choice and agency. Additionally, this transformative image of power subverts reductive discourses about the meekness of wives, spinsters, and widows of Asian descent.

Lai's three focalizers—the poetess, Fox, and Artemis—remain cultural outsiders, their lesbianism and female-to-female sexual relationships constantly interpolated by heteronormative orthodoxy within and outside their Asian and Canadian communities.<sup>34</sup> However, they affirm what Lai calls “women identified women” of Asian North American ancestry as a meaningful category, with Lai passionately investing in retrieving and affirming them as subjects and recognizing the validity of their homosexual relationships.

All four narratives discussed in this chapter are clearly counterstories that show transgressive sexual engagements that radically relocate permissible boundaries and subvert limiting cultural preconceptions about Asian women, particularly with regard to their powerlessness. They recognize the centrality of gender and sexuality to Asian women's lives and identities, and the importance of incorporating these issues into their politics.



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**ORALITY, TEXTUALIZED ORATURE,  
AND CULTURAL FUSIONS**

*Myth, folklore, bedtime stories and other vernacular forms are used as valid versions of the past .... [They are] a 'rememory'... which listens to and speaks the multifariousness of the past as we receive it, through both legacies of orality and textual modes of inscription.*

— *Helen Grice*, *Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women's Writing*, 94

The project of (re)presentation and repair takes Hiromi Goto and Larissa Lai into the realm of the oral as they rewrite the contemporary and collective experience of Asian women in Canada. Helen Grice suggests that forms of the oral are a “rememory” (94), the prefix “re” emphasizing not only opportunities for repeated recall but also possibilities for reimagining previous and present experience. This privileging of the vernacular in Asian North American narratives joins female memory with narrative forms beyond written histories, among them stories of ancestors, myths, and folklore (94), expressed through simulations of the oral and using language beyond so-called standard English. Both are demonstrated in Filipina American Jessica Hagedorn's simulation of the oral in her 1990 novel *Dogeaters*, which recalls “Pinoyese,” the mix of English and Tagalog that is the dominant language of the Philippines, and acknowledges how language, with its rich cultural connections, becomes a critical site of struggle and vindication, a place in which alignment between self and place disrupted by colonialism and transnational experience can be recuperated. She reclaims Tagalog, her native tongue, and adulterates it with English, peppering her novel with the flavor of a familiar but decidedly oral idiom. While possibly running the risk of alienating non-Filipino/a readers, Hagedorn nonetheless insists on her characters, as Alfred Yuson notes,

“dropping their namans and Hoys and nakus in italics without as much as a footnote or end glossary to explain what they all mean” (15). The gesture for Hagedorn is as much personal as political; as she said in an interview, “I started writing the novel and it was so proper, and I thought that’s not how Filipinos talk and think! There’s this playfulness that I wanted to capture and that I also find really magical” (Talbot 16). She recaptured the oral, simulating it on the pages of her novel by showing the “way Manilans gossiped (with feverish abandon), teased one another (with ego-deflating nicknames like ‘Bong-bong’ and ‘Baby’) and spoke English with frequent seamless shifts into Tagalog” (16). With “tsismis” (Tagalog for gossip) the central linguistic currency of the text and the dominant discursive form of a collection of characters in this pop novel about the Philippines, Hagedorn effects narrative repair in her evocation of the speaking voice as also reflective of the cultural hybridity of the experience such writing represents.

This chapter addresses two forms of cultural fusions: simulations of the oral and textualized orature. Both modes fuse the oral with the written and alternate versions of the past with current realities to produce hybrid texts reflective of their multiple locations, to recall cultural and communal affiliations, and to articulate past and present political realities. In examining new forms of the oral in contemporary Canadian fiction, Wendy Roy in “ ‘The Power and the Paradox’ of the Spoken Story: Challenges to the Tyranny of the Written in Contemporary Canadian Fiction” notes that, in *simulating orality*, the “representation of the sounded word ... is not literally an oral utterance,” but exhibits features of orality such as “storytelling, referring to and often theorizing the act, and differentiating stories from the remainder of the text through various narrative techniques that go beyond simple enclosure of speech in quotation marks” (202). Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy: The Technology of the Word*, also denotes the following as markers of orality: rhythm, repetition, formulaic structure, redundancy, and additive and aggregative syntax

and an “authentic” oral voicing (34-40). For Margery Fee, in “Writing Orality: Interpreting Literature in English by Aboriginal Writers in North America, Australia and New Zealand,” discourse conventions around such matters as “conversational turn-taking, code-switching, amount of talk, verbal deference, directness of questions or answers, control of topic, self-presentation, and attitudes to other language varieties” (32) can valuably be considered as part of writing orality. Additionally, a simulation of orality might include, as Susan Gingell and Roy noted is the case with artists involved in the conversational circle of *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the Oral, Written, and Visual*, “play[ing] with the way language looks on the page and how it sounds, exploiting language’s semantic power” (“Opening the Door” 15). Their simulation of the oral in this case embraces the performative as it approximates what Thomas King calls, in reference to Harry Robinson’s *Write It on Your Heart*, “an oral syntax that defeats readers’ efforts to read the stories silently to themselves, a syntax that encourages readers to read the stories out loud” (qtd. in Gingell, “When X Equals Zero” 458).

Challenging the contours of the realist novel, the written story, and standard Canadian English, Goto’s *A Chorus of Mushrooms* and Lai’s *When Fox Is a Thousand* suggest that these literary forms and language are simply not adequate to represent Asian Canadians. The authors’ cultural fusions decentre EuroCanadianness, acknowledge cultural difference and possibilities for cultural change, and emphasize the heterogeneity of narratives and identity in multicultural Canada. Their replications of the oral in *A Chorus of Mushrooms* and *When Fox Is a Thousand* entail many of the strategies noted earlier, including print textualizing of the oral and phonetic transcriptions defying standardized spelling, storytelling features, direct addresses to imagined audiences, rambling and copious narratives, overt commentaries, extended digressions, redundancy, the multivocality of texts, and magic and fantasy. Simulating the oral in this context

continues the life of the oral; at its locus is a return to the mother tongue, the privileging of the ear over the eye, and the embrace of the performative and participatory aspects of oral tradition that are by themselves gestures of resistance. They reverse power hierarchies as the standard language becomes, to an extent, minor—“ ‘stretch[ed],’ ” as Gloria Anzaldua terms it, “ ‘out of its major shape’ ” (qtd. in Kaplan 190)—and as the native English speaker is simultaneously drawn by the oral in the language, yet estranged from a defamiliarized grapholect.

In “Opening the Door to Transdisciplinary, Multimodal Communication,” the introduction to *Listening Up*, Gingell and Roy advance a term earlier coined by Gingell, *textualized orature*, to mean “orature [that] has undergone a process of de- and re-contextualization,” transforming it into what Gingell terms “the oral+.” The processes of “transcription, translation, digitizing, other forms of technological mediation, or some combination of the foregoing” involved in textualization refashion orature, likely resulting in its reduction, alienation, or impairment; however, as Gingell also suggests, these transformations are not necessarily without their rewards (12-13). Certainly, as is the case with Goto and Lai, their remaking of forms of orality already initially textualized, as discussed in this chapter’s second section, offers them the freedom to rearticulate their and their communities’ experiences, particularly as these (re)present their locations in diaspora. Like the Japanese folk stories, myths, and legends that Goto retells or the ancient Chinese stories about fox spirits and Wu-tse Tsien that Lai adapts from Chinese literature and history, these inventive and generically hybrid texts mix various discourses, literary forms, and cultures in one work.

Earlier inventive revisions to folk stories have been part of Asian North American women’s writing for at least forty years. Possibly the most well-known is Maxine Hong Kingston’s 1976 *The Woman Warrior*, which draws upon inherited ancestral oral narratives, especially the story of the mythical woman warrior Fa Mu Lan from the Chinese “Ballad of Mulan.” Sauling Wong notes

that Fa Mu Lan has “gained the status of a topos” in Chinese literature (28). Kingston’s print textualized version, far from traditional while equally reflecting many elements from classical Chinese narratives of warrior revenge and peasant revolution, reads as a fantasy, retaining aspects of the myth while changing others and emphasizing Fa Mu Lan’s transformation into a woman warrior with her many victories disguised as those of a man. Grice contends that Kingston also added to *The Woman Warrior* fragments of other parables, among them the story of Ngak Fei, a male heroic figure whose mother had characters demanding his service in honour of his kinspeople carved on his back. Along with Chinese American Amy Tan (*The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, and *The Hundred Secret Senses*), Kingston also utilizes the “talking-story,” which is discussed in this chapter’s second section in relation to Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Another Asian North American woman writer who makes use of vernacular and oral traditions and simulations of the oral reflective of an Asian culture is Korean American Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who, in telling the stories of her ancestors in *Dictee* (1982), uses maps, journals, histories, and conversations. Chinese American Ruthanne Lum McCunn, meanwhile, utilizes the idea of the wooden fish, a Chinese percussion instrument used by women to tell stories in song, as a narrative device in her 1995 *Wooden Fish Songs* (90).

These simulations and textualizing repair damages wrought by colonization and imperialism, such as strategies of Eurocentrism and enforcement of differences (Henderson 59), which deem certain thoughts, identities, and experiences as inferior. These Eurocentric practices impose formalist thought, western literary criteria, the privileging of the literate and the written over the oral, the standardization of English, and others. In discussing Neal McLeod’s work in multiple, often hybridized media, Gingell describes the devastating losses suffered by Cree peoples as a result of colonizing concepts of orality and literacy: “Their sound was, and for many still, is so

central to their identities and connection to their territory that the soundness of their subjectivity is threatened by the loss of their language's distinctive sound as it transmits the stories"

("Traditionalizing Modernity" 314-15). For Gingell, McLeod's traditionalizing of modernity through a mix of the oral, written, and visual "consciously calls [colonizing and neo-colonizing] histories into the present to constitute a critique of colonial history and a sound basis for a distinctively Cree future" (309). Writing and textualizing the oral restores the originary culture and as Fee suggests "serve[s] to metonymically signal cultural difference" (29), effectively countering the erasure of voices and degradation of identities by Eurocentric and literary tyrannies.

When "orature is lifted out of the discursive environment where it lived, thus decontextualizing or decentering it, and reifying it when it is then carried across into a new medium and discursive environment, thus also recontextualizing or recentring it" (Opening the Door" 14), as Gingell claims, it has transformative potential. As is the case with Goto, Lai, and the other writers noted earlier, such rewriting becomes a means to preserve ancestral cultures, likely with the inclusion of the vernacular, while simultaneously embracing elements of new cultures, to (re)present new, hybridized identities and experiences, and to voice the self in diaspora.

## SIMULATING THE ORAL

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*I think there is a different kind of intimacy in oral telling than there is in textual telling. Orality requires a kind of immediacy that text does not. At least does not necessarily. And so my telling becomes an expeditious way of bringing people in on the otherwise subtle humour of the text. But it is providing a glossary in a way, isn't it? Is and isn't because there are invariably at least a few people in any audience who know the story before I tell it. My telling becomes for them a repetition and a validation.*

— Larissa Lai, *Interview with Ashok Mathur*

Both Larissa Lai and Hiromi Goto incorporate ancient Asian oral traditions into their novels, writing aspects of traditional orature into modern contexts and weaving memory, myth, history and fantasy into contemporary stories. They achieve this retelling by simulating the oral: adopting the storytelling frame characteristic of the oral mode, print textualizing the oral, and creating magical stories typical of oral lore through complex discursive strategies such as multiple narrators.

In Lai's interview with Ashok Mathur, she explains her privileging of oral over textual telling, citing, among other reasons, "immediacy" and "intimacy." Emphasizing the oral brings readers into direct involvement with the text so that a listener engages in storytelling: it creates connections between the writer and reader and between the reader and a possibly already familiar story. Of the three narrators in Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*, Fox best replicates the oral storyteller's voice and lends the text its oral qualities, especially through direct address to an imagined audience. The oral features of Lai's story of Fox are not limited only to a rambling and copious narrative leading to overt commentaries and extended digressions from the story's development, but is also evident in references to implied listeners and the emphasis on narrators. For example, in introducing Artemis Wong, a contemporary Canadian female character in a novel that reaches back into the past to tell the story of a ninth-century Chinese poet-nun, Fox says, "You say: A funny name for a Chinese girl. I will correct you. Chinese-Canadian. Make no mistake, because her name is a name that marks a generation of immigrant children whose parents loved the idea of the Enlightenment and thought they would find it blooming in the full heat of its rational fragrance right here in North America" (10). Fox, in this passage, emphasizes the importance of names. Her repeated use of the second-person pronoun "you" also directly addresses the reader as surrogate audience member and engages him or her as a dialogic character, denoting a history of communication between narrator and reader/listener and anticipating a response. Additionally, when

Fox adds, “[s]o here she is, with a good mouthful of a first name to go with the short, crisp monosyllable last—Artemis, the virgin huntress” (10), “here” is deictic, analogous to the act of utterance, suggesting the contexts of the moment of speaking, time, place, and audience. Further, Fox’s use of verbs in the imperative such as *make* in the earlier passage and *think* in the following one—“[t]hink of her out on a moon yellow night, arrow pulled taut against bowstring and the taste of blood in her mouth (10)” —also implies a form of direct address. These calls to the reader characterize the narrative as oral, what Ong denotes as “empathetic and participatory,” and “achieving close ... communal participation with the known,” not “objectively distanced” as is usually the case with a written text (45). Lai’s text thus demonstrates a feature common to oral cultures, which, as Ong suggests, “lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time ... for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously” (41-42).

Like Lai’s narrative, Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* also imagines the reader as the audience for the tale told, in addition to the character represented as listening to the narrator’s words. A close communal identification between narrator, character, and audience is created, for example, when the older Murasaki relates a conversation she has with her Japanese lover about storytelling:

*“Will you tell me a story?” you ask...*

*“Sure, but bear with my language, won’t you? My Japanese isn’t as good as my English, and you might not get everything I say. But that doesn’t mean the story’s not there to understand. Wakatte kureru kashira? Can you listen before you hear?”*

*“Trust me,” you say.*

*I pause. Take a deep breath, then spiral into sound.*

*“Here’s a true story.”* (1-2, original italics)



With the second person “you,” Goto’s first-person narrator Murasaki addresses not only her lover but also the reader, allowing for an “empathetic and participatory” style that simulates the oral. Because oral verbal performance frequently involves diminishing the distance set up by writing (Ong 45), most oral narratives privilege audience identification with the performer; this sense of the narrator, character, and listener as bound together is one that Goto carries over into her text. Her blurring between character and audience enables the reader to be part of the story and not merely an auditor-spectator.

Animating *Chorus of Mushrooms* with the language of the oral, Goto further incorporates oral processes in both form and style, analogous to what Gingell, in “When X Equals Zero: The Politics of Voice in First Peoples’ Poetry by Women,” acknowledges as strategies of “writ[ing] the oral in a variety of English inflected by the voicings of First Peoples” (461). In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, the voicings are inflected by a Japanese Canadian heritage. As Goto textualizes the oral, a practice that, according to Gingell, “translat[es] oral verbal art into any mediated form” (“Glossary”), she also includes formulary expressions, redundancy and *copia*, additive structures, an empathetic and participatory approach (Ong 31-45), and a resistance to standard spacing and spelling (Gingell 458, 452).

Goto’s Japanese formulary expression—“Mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukāshi,” meaning “in ancient times, in ancient times, in very, very ancient times” — often functions as a prelude to the stories. While this opening formula allows the oral storytelling frame to hold throughout the novel, it also provides a pattern for “retention and ready recall” (Ong 34). “To solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought,” Ong explains, primary oral cultures think in “mnemonic patterns shaped for ready oral recurrence” (34). When Naoe says, “Words, words, words. Ahh, words grow heavier every day, upon my bony back” (CM 21) or “The wind blows from

the west, the west, the west, again” (37), the redundancy in her speech helps enact the “rhythmic discourse” that, as Ong reports, is incessantly found in oral narratives (35). This “pragmatic” sensibility, as opposed to the “syntactic” (37-38) and the “need to keep going while [the speaker] is running through his mind what to say next,” are more aligned with speech than the comparatively “sparse linearity” that is the purview of writing (40).

Goto’s medium of communication is print, but she also utilizes hybrid modes, combining oral and written features; an example is her occasional alteration of standard spacing and spelling, in which the lack of standardization often signals how words should be pronounced, phrased, or paced. Frequently used during emotionally heightened instances in the novel, such resistance privileges an oral reading of the text to get the desired effect. Thus, when Naoe asks if Murasaki would “listen with an open ear and close [her] eyes to thought” (*CM* 20) and when Murasaki responds with “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.ican’t.ican’t.ican’tican’tican’t” (20), or when Kay, Murasaki’s mother, reacting to Murasaki’s hands stained with orange peel, mutters “Yellow, she’s turningyellow she’sturningyellow she’s—” (92), Goto effectively infuses these statements with frustration or fear, as would be evident when spoken, by running the words into each other, going against the standard practice of having white spaces between words. When Murasaki asks, “Whendoesitend?Whendoesitend?Whendoesitend?WhendoesitendWhendoesitendwhendoesitendwhendoesitendwhendoesitendwhendoesitendwhendoesitendwhen” (212), or when the Calgary Stampede announcer enunciates his words, “Laaaadies and gentlemen ... Let’s give a rowdy Calgary Stampede yaaahooooo to the best bullriders in the whole wide world!” “Yaaaaaaaahooooooooooooo!” (215), Goto encodes in writing what David Olson in *The World on Paper* identifies as “prosodic features of speech.” She provides examples of “the rising intonation in a question, and paralinguistic features such as volume and voice quality,” as well as the illocutionary

force of statements or “how the speaker intended what was said to be taken” (Olson 92). And when Murasaki, in noting how her Obāchan called her “purple” (165), stretches the word to read “puurrrrrrple” (165), Goto also suggests a phonetic transcription that defies standardized spelling to favor an oral reading of her text or call attention to what Keith Rayner and Alexander Pollatsek call subvocalisation as a phenomenon of silent reading (Rayner and Pollatsek 18). The prompt to oral reading encoded in these non-standard features recalls in part what Gingell terms “verbal play and meaning-making that depend on the eye, as well as the ear” (455), a privileging of sounds, a scripting of sound dynamics using letters and white space.

Goto’s dominantly English narrative also includes what Naoe hears to be “cowboy” inflected rhythms and intonations in the explanation by the truck driver, Tengu, of his name’s origin:

Little kids in ther school uniforms ’n little yellow packsacks would follow me ’roun  
’n giggle and call me ‘*Gaijin! Gaijin!*’ but not in any sorta mean way, but kinda like  
ther jokin’ ’n real happy ’n I didn’t mind atall. But I wuz ther thru the summer as  
well, ’n did poorly in the heat. T’aint the heat that gits ta ya, mind ya, but that  
humidity all pourin’ down my back ’n face ’n my face turnin’ all red. My face wuz all  
red all summer ’n on accounta my red face ’n my big nose, well those kids’re startin’  
ta call me ‘*Tengu! Tengu!*’ Tooka good look in the mirror when I got home ’n sher  
enuff, I’m the spittin’ image of the *tengu* I saw the uther night on the *Mukashi-*  
*banashi* [Japanese fairytales] program fer kids ’n I laughed out loud. (CM 110-11)

This literary ventriloquizing, as with other instances of Goto’s simulation of the oral, demonstrates her inventive play and dexterity with language and, more importantly, her desire to get across multiple variations of speech and of culture. Such a strategy makes readers aware that members of the host group do not all speak in the privileged lect of the diasporic locale; she also cautions against

a damaging equation of orality and non-standard Englishes with diasporic groups that leaves the literary and the powerful standard language to be associated with the dominant group. Her adoption, in this instance, of a Western North American working-class accent, created by eye dialect like the dropping of initial and terminal sounds, as in 'n for *and* and *startin'* for *starting*, suggests as well her diasporic location and her attempt to merge within her narrative her Asian and North American experiences.

The polyvocality of Lai's and Goto's texts allow multiple voices, perspectives, and stories to be heard; they are part of multi-sourced oral storytelling that is hybridized and comes from different cultural locations. Lai unsettles a conventional narrative voice completely by having three separate and very different narrators, although it is Fox that begins and ends the narrative rather than the human voice of the other female narrator or that of the third-person narrator. Even as Fox takes readers on its time-traveling through the T'ang Dynasty and twentieth-century Canada, Lai also allows both Yu Hsuan-Chi and Artemis to be heard. The result is an engaging narrative voiced through a mythic animal figure, a fictionalized version of a poet from the distant past, and a third-person contemporary narrator focused on one individual, with the changes among these three voices signaled by visual icons, respectively a fox, a woman, and a tree.<sup>35</sup> With diverse narrators weaving through story, memory, and history, Lai simulates the oral, conjoining the fictive and the historical, the past and the present, and the two cultures of which she has had extended experience, Chinese and Canadian.

Shao-Pin Luo argues in "Translation and Transformation in *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *When Fox Is a Thousand*" that "stories are told by different tellers and heard by various listeners in all sorts of contexts and for all kinds of purposes" and that storytelling is itself "a performance art, creative, improvisational, physical, participatory, and transformational" (123-24). The

transformational possibilities are apparent in the way that an oral story is told differently each time it is told by a new storyteller or at a new time, and this difference is evident in the multivocality of Lai's text. In an interview, she calls attention to the need for constructing multiple versions of reality, especially when one belongs to a minority group: "If all the truths that I can find are already ideologically determined, what harm is there in producing another, true to my own quirky sense of the world?" ("Stories" 4). Indeed, (re)presentations of what Lai self-deprecatingly refers to as her "quirky sense of the world" help to repair the harm done by the dominance of monological discourse and the depreciation of other language varieties in found communities.

Like Lai, Goto says she offered "as many voices as I could" in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, wanting to "bring in as many sides into it as possible so it wasn't just one narrative reading." She also wanted "to have the reader have a sense of participation so that they have choices" in the same way that an oral performance allows an audience member ("Goto's *Chorus*" 9-10). In one of the final chapters of her book, "An Immigrant Story with a Happy Ending," Goto presents multiple voices, including one possibly from the dominant culture: "You can never trust those people, you know. Heavens, I've tried, but you can never tell what they're thinking. And they always stick to their own kind, never mixing with other people. Always talking in a foreign language. And even when they do bother talking in English, why their accent is so thick, I can't make out a single word. If those people want to live in Canada, they've got to try a little harder. That's not too much to ask, is it?" (CM 211). Another voice, likely that of a rather smug immigrant, argues that there are others (illegal ones) who do not merit residing in Canada: "I deserve to be here. I earned the right to live here" (211).

Additionally, like Lai, Goto uses alternating narrators: Murasaki, a young Japanese Canadian woman, and Naoe, her grandmother, although Naoe's voice is sometimes apparently appropriated by

Murasaki. Murasaki says, “I can’t tell where Obāchan ends and I begin or if I made the whole thing up or if it was all Obāchan” (68), acknowledging that she may be making up stories about her grandmother, simulating her grandmother’s voice. In other instances, as in the section delineating Naoe’s escape, the first part of that incident is told by Murasaki, with Naoe given the first-person narrative voice; the voice then alternates between first and third person (80-81). As well, when Naoe supposedly narrates her experiences with Tengu, the reader can assume that Murasaki is appropriating Naoe’s storytelling legacy, using it to create and tell her own imaginative stories about her grandmother, even though she does not know what happened to her (89). And with the words, “You know you can change the story” at the end of the novel, Murasaki suggests that the accounts of Naoe’s bullriding and encounter with Tengu are magical, made up to honour her grandmother’s spirit. Here, the grandmother figures as spectre, a haunting apparition, then becomes spectacle before de-materializing again into spectre in the storm. Her brief appearance as spectacle is a remarkable sight worthy of critical attention for its host of possibilities. The scene invites symbolic if not allegorical interpretation, and dangles the possibility that the colloquialism “bull,” which means total and often self-serving nonsense, is at work in this remarkable episode.

Naoe alludes to Murasaki’s later appropriation of her voice, saying of her granddaughter, “she cannot understand the words I speak, but she can read the lines on my brow, the creases beside my mouth” (15). This embodied communication suggests that paralinguistic features, which Gingell encodes through the neologism *oral+*, are also highly articulate. Murasaki, herself “always hungry for words, even when I was very little” (98), acknowledges Naoe’s claim: “I never understood the words she said, but I watched and learned. And I begin my understanding now. Obāchan took another route, something more harmonious. Showed me that words take form and live and breathe among us. Language a living beast” (98-99). From Naoe, Murasaki learns to tell her own stories,

embracing language as embodied phenomenon as opposed to the disembodied language of writing: “They swirled, swelled, and eddied. The words swept outside to be tugged and tossed by the prairie-shaping wind. Like a chain of seeds they lifted, then scattered. Obāchan and I, our voices lingered, reverberated off hollow walls and stretched across the land with streamers of silken thread” (21). The memories, individuals, and affiliations, the living culture embodied in these stories bring grandmother and granddaughter not only to an intimate knowledge of each other but also to an understanding of their multiple locations.

Lai’s and Goto’s simulations of the oral counter so-called standard English, exposing it as merely a privileged lect through which the identities of the hegemonic group are constituted and consolidated. They prioritize their mother tongues and ancestral legacies to articulate more precisely their hybridized identities and experiences. Because they use oral conventions and narrative strategies that are based in an Asian culture, imbedded within contemporary fiction set at least partly in Canada, their conversations become even more complex and compelling and assume critical roles in restabilizing Asian Canadian women subjects.

## WRITING CULTURE BY RETELLING MYTH

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*The myth ... in its original living form, is not a mere tale told but a reality lived. It is not in the nature of an invention such as we read in our novels today, but living reality, believed to have occurred in primordial times and to be influencing ever afterwards the world and the destinies of men. . .*

— C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, 5

According to Carl Jung and Carl Kerényi, myths are as relevant to the present as they are to the past because they influence the world through their telling and retelling. Oral lore as a whole continues to make its impact felt long after the original telling, informing humankind's deliberations and actions. "Kept alive" (5), but also constantly revisioned through multiple, differing versions, oral narratives prevail in the most optimistic reimaginings, as personal memory and personal politics turn them into collective constructive strategies.

This section demonstrates how Goto and Lai further reimagine Asian women through a redefinition of their cultural heritages, a revision of their traditional memories, and a rewriting of their inherited oral traditions. Their work, demonstrating their cross-cultural identity and its aesthetic staging, represents a transformative politics that speaks to their multiple affiliations as women, Asians, Canadians, and immigrants. Recreating cultural connections by deconstructing and reconstructing the past and their Asian inheritances, and adapting their stories in the context of current Canadian social-historical circumstances, Goto and Lai demonstrate Wendy Ho's claim that new stories evolve from old ones, that variants are produced in the telling of oral lore, creating many stories and allowing for new versions to give form to women's "own experiences, beliefs, and ideals" and acting as "one way [to] create culture" (Ho 134).



Using stories told by women as a mode of discourse and a structuring device, Goto, as noted in the previous section, marks the beginning of each story in *Chorus of Mushrooms* with the repeated Japanese phrase “Mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukāshi” (“in ancient times, in ancient times, in very, very ancient times”), placing her novel in a temporal frame of repeated storytelling. Such practice also locates her narrative at the heart of an oral tradition, what Ho calls, in relation to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, the *talking-story*. Storytelling among generations of women brings from these cultural groups multiple and generational histories, demonstrates Asian and North American influences, and carries communal and political implications. Kingston herself defines the talking-story genre as “an oral tradition of history, mythology, genealogy, bedtime stories and how-to stories that have been passed down through generations, an essential part of family and community life. ... [It] is actually part of the ‘low’ or ‘small’ Chinese culture” (qtd. in L. S. Chan). Although the talking-story is said to be a Chinese tradition, Ho also claims that it is linked to the local oral traditions in Hawaii: “‘Talk-story,’ a pidgin expression, is a social or communal oral exchange in which people gather to ‘chew the fat’ or ‘shoot the breeze’ with friends and family” (28, n1). Similar oral traditions, according to Ho, can also be found in Native American and African American cultures (28, n1), and Goto’s novel suggests that they may also be found in Japanese Canadian culture.

While Goto has not publicly acknowledged drawing on Kingston’s use of the talking-story in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, her adaptation of Japanese folk stories parallels Kingston’s adaptation of Chinese oral lore. Her revision of oral lore already print textualized and published by ethnographers outside the Japanese cultural community is similar to talking-story practices of retelling, in which each story becomes its own original experience. As Ho suggests, “there is no fixed, unitary, or right story to be told through all space and time. Each story has its own validity in the continuum of

cultural survival, power, and moral accountability” (134). With “its fluid, organic form,” Ho argues, talking-story “is continuously open to the speaker’s embellishment and transformative imaginative power, and becomes a way of telling *and* enacting stories that are not one story but many” (123, original italics). Its evolving nature validates what Ong also identifies as characteristic of the oral: oral traditions which include “as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it” (42), and “[o]ld formulas and themes ...[that] have to be made to interact with new and often complicated political situations” (42). As Goto’s Naoe tells Murasaki, “It is the nature of words to change with the telling. They are changing in your mind even as I speak” (*CM* 32). Such openness to change and potential for (re)presentations provides writers like Goto with compelling transformative possibilities.

The stories that Naoe narrates—the creation story of “Izanami and Izanagi” (29-32), the heroic deeds tale of “Miwa and Issun Boshi” (70-73), “Uba-Sute Yama” (63-68), and “Yamamba” or “Yama-uba”—are themselves adapted from Japanese folk stories, myths, and legends. Goto acknowledges these texts at the end of her novel, especially Richard Dorson’s *Folk Legends of Japan*, Juliet Piggott’s *Japanese Mythology*, and two volumes of Muraskai Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji* (221). While Naoe tells the story of the yamamba, a mountain witch or evil spirit in Japanese mythology, to the truck driver Tengu, it is to Murasaki that she narrates the more significantly women-centred stories of Izanami, Miwa, and the “Uba-Sute Yama.”

Goto’s adaptations of Japanese oral lore in “Izanami and Izanagi” and “Issun Boshi” reimagine the figure of the subordinated Japanese woman and imbue her with power and potential. Borrowed from Piggott’s text and then reworked, Goto’s version of “Izanami and Izanagi” has the female Izanami, instead of her brother Izanagi, initiating the journey down the rainbow and the creation of the universe. While Piggott’s account has Izanagi creating the islands of Japan with his

spear, Goto's adaptation of the creation myth replaces this spear with Izanami's fingers: she "dipped her fingers in the cool blue water and flung the droplets back into the water" in order to create islands (*CM* 31-32). Similarly, Piggott's telling the myth of "Issun-Boshi" (literally meaning "Little One Inch") has Boshi fearlessly vanquish two *oni*, use a magic mallet to grow to a normal human size, marry an unidentified woman, and take care of his parents. Goto's version not only names Miwa as the woman Boshi marries, but also literally and figuratively diminishes Boshi. When he becomes arrogant and violent as his size and stature increase—he scorns his kindly, if impoverished, parents, and attacks Miwa sexually in a way that "he thought suited his manly position," "caring not a whit for her pleasure" (72)—Miwa uses the magic mallet on him. As Boshi shrinks back to the size of the tip of a finger, "Miwa lifted her graceful foot and crushed him beneath her heel. All that was left was a tiny stain on an otherwise spotless *tatami* [mat]" (73). With only the stain left as evidence of Boshi's existence, the ramifications of Goto's reversal of gender hierarchies are many; one, in this case, involves the female enacting violence against the male as a punitive gesture, replacing her victimhood with his.

According to Shao-Pin Luo, Goto's accounts are not "faithful to the 'authentic' versions, which are always already different anyway," but instead are "*intended* to be transplanted and hybridized in the new landscape" (121, original italics). The stories simultaneously evolve and multiply in the course of their replication, each deliberately transformative as it empowers Asian immigrants and their descendants with visions to bridge both Eastern and Western worlds and the past and present as they adapt to new lives in Canada. Goto's retelling emphasizes what Luo calls "the necessity of immigrants recreating a landscape of their own for survival in the new country" (128) that can also accommodate the more egalitarian values of North America, and its ideals of independence, strength, creativity, and choice.

In the folk legend “Uba-Sute Yama,” an ironic and playful pun has Goto transform what is in the original version “a place where people are abandoned” into “a place of abandonment” (68), thus calling attention to the female characters’ creative energies and protean possibilities. Named after a mountain where elderly people are left behind to meet their fates because of impoverished conditions, Goto’s “Uba-Sute Yama” tells of a grandmother turning sixty who desires to see her sister for some “fun” before she is abandoned. In Goto’s comical account, the woman asks her sister for “a nice home perm,” and together they smoke half a package of Mild Sevens and share a chocolate bar, “flopp[ing] backwards on the springy moss” (67), their actions demonstrating that “what we call something governs the scope and breadth of what it’ll be” (68). Flinging her arms wide, the grandmother revises the notion of abandonment, rendered negative in the initial narrative, to one of throwing off internalized constraints on female indulgence and liberation. The notion of being left to die is translated into a celebration of life.

Goto’s adaptation of “Yamamba,” a story of a female mountain muse, similarly recuperates the “monstrous” female archetype and displaces male power. Original versions have contrasting portrayals, with the Yama Uba sometimes depicted as an “ogre,” “goblin,” or “demon” whose hair is transformed into snakes, and at other times as a more constructive creature who is seen “making thread from vines to weave cloth, acting as midwife...and killing troublesome wild boars by throwing stones at them from the mountaintop” (Luo 127). In a departure from a tale anthologized by Dorson, Goto’s yamamba does not duplicate the more savage aspects of the original models; instead it becomes what Guy Beauregard identifies as a “positive figure who rehabilitates a polluted, post-apocalyptic world” (“Hiromi Goto” 52). Discovering “an earth too beaten to weep” and inhabited by the “stench” and “silence of dead and dying things” (*CM* 116), the yamamba reconfigures maggots who prey on the dead into “millions of soft-skinned people” (118) and

recreates a world where the water “no longer sickly ... was crystal clear” and “the earth, flowers and trees and delicate mushrooms burst from the ground in great profusion” (118-19). Hers becomes a transformative way of grappling with decay and death: “I am a *yamamba* and I am strong. I will speak my words aloud and shape the earth again” (116). Evoking the power of the spoken word, Goto’s mountain muse appropriates and transforms a distressing territory into a rich and imaginative female space animated with new life and promise.

In *When Fox Is a Thousand*, Lai similarly tells and retells versions of an ancient Chinese folktale. She takes readers through layers of time and imagery in a fox’s hauntings of a ninth-century Chinese nun-poetess and the impact of the fox on a twentieth-century Chinese Canadian woman. Adapted from Chinese stories about fox spirits collected by Pu Song-ling, a sixteenth-century writer, Lai’s versions are the result of accessing what she calls “parts of our own history through various ‘specialists’” (*WFT* “Source Notes” and “Acknowledgements”). Many of Song-ling’s stories in his *Liaozhai* collection are reconstructions of stories from during and before the Tang dynasty, and some were later translated into English by Herbert A. Giles and published in two volumes in 1880 (“Chinese Fox Myths”). While most of Song-ling’s stories have the fox appearing in both male and female forms, the most famous tales are those of fox spirits disguised as attractive young girls, as is the case in Lai’s novel. Lai’s adaptations reproduce fox characteristics from Chinese legends, especially its longevity and preponderance of *Yin*, “the female portion of things.” Rearticulated in *When Fox Is a Thousand* are common assumptions that the fox’s “craftiness” extends its life to 800 to 1,000 years and that its “nocturnal habits” allow it to accumulate *Yin* and “assume the guise of woman” (“Chinese Fox Myths”). Lai’s Fox, however, departs from mythic stereotypes; where other foxes in the narrative deem as “respectable” the preoccupations of fishing and stealing, it does not “do either anymore, except on those rare occasions when courtesy demands

it” (*WFT* 5), engaging instead in transformative forays, haunting scholars on dark nights in the guise of various women. Such “unorthodox methods” appall its honest family of foxes (5), and while the “foxes of [its] fox hole” eventually accept its “unnatural behavior,” they disavow its “animating [of] the bodies of the dead” and writing about this “thrill of new life” (6). Fox’s rejection of convention and its exclusion from the society of foxes may be interpreted as analogous to Lai’s occupation as a writer, which Pilar Cuder-Dominguez, Belén Martín-Lucas, and Sonia Villegas-López argue may be considered “unnatural” and may contribute to her “condition of ‘otherness’” (61).<sup>36</sup> This unconventionality also parallels that of Lai’s other female characters who engage in woman-to-woman connections even as, according to “Chinese Fox Myths” and as reworked in Lai’s text, the Fox “looks to gather *Yang*, the male element,” preying on “the life-force of men to achieve longevity.” Lai’s Fox similarly metamorphoses from animal-eating to animating the dead, and changes, in the process, the belief that the fox is the destroyer of man; here, it atypically becomes the savior (“When Fox”). Its nature transformed upon its arrival in Canada—more than just a “mere quirk of ... character,” the penchant for nightly roaming becomes a whole way of life—Lai’s Fox figures the way that “migration fundamentally and permanently changes value systems” (*WFT* 5). It becomes a useful symbol for “ethnicity” (Cuder-Dominguez, Martín-Lucas, and Villegas-López 60), a metaphor for the immigrant and hybrid subject who traverses geographic and cultural boundaries. It transforms itself through breath, breathing life into dead bodies, Lai suggests, as a “brown person” would “into an assimilated white self” (Interview). This transformation through breath is a Taoist and Buddhist practice, the infusion of Asian spirituality connecting Lai with her desire “to rediscover a selfhood that does not rely on either white and/or patriarchal expectations of what I/we should be.” Such weaving of the Asian with the Canadian turns *When Fox Is a Thousand* into a “historical launch pad” for what she claims are “hybrid flowers like myself” (Interview).

Apart from the fox myth, Lai also retells stories borrowed from Chinese literature and history. The story of Wu-tse Tsien (AD 624-705), which Lai narrates twice in different contexts, is itself a “rewriting of history,” as Shao-Pin Luo suggests (123). Wu’s story is first told by the poetess in an argument with others over whether or not the empress had been a benevolent ruler and over the authenticity of a story concerning the empress and a pear tree branch blossoming out of season (60); the narrative is retold by Fox to Artemis in the disguised form of “The Story of the Owl” (160).<sup>37</sup> The story is often prefaced by the “uncertainties” of those involved in the discussion, as each qualifies his or her version of the narrative with “I remember a story,” or “I seem to remember that story differently,” or “Everybody knows that story. Come on, tell us what you know” (*WFT* 60). These premises allow Lai to imply that, as Luo suggests, “even for an empress, history tells only slanted tales” (123). Lai herself slants the empress’s story even further by intimating personal details about her and juxtaposing scenes of both consensus and controversy among the women of the period. These adaptations demonstrate what Ong identifies as “narrative originality in oral cultures,” which involves “introducing new elements into old stories” (42). Many of Goto’s and Lai’s elements are magical and fantastic, infusing their texts with vibrancy and spontaneity reminiscent of oral lore, but also breaking from standard, linear, realistic narrative lines while reiterating some of the themes of those more conventional stories. Naoe’s bursts of speech, sensuality, and bullriding prowess in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and Fox’s travelling through time, crossing of borders, assuming of various disguises, and habitation of female bodies in *When Fox Is A Thousand* emphasize the concepts of hybridity, mutation, and change central to both novels.

In *In Slanting I, Imagining We*, Lai calls what happens in *Chorus of Mushrooms* a “carnival” in which the “textuality of truth” and “alternative temporality” gloriously reign, unsettling conventions and traditions. Lai demonstrates that Goto’s Naoe resists traditional representations of

the grandmother as “lost history,” particularly of the “histories of trauma,” locating instead her body as a site of pleasure and thus liberation. Noting Mikhail Bakhtin’s emphasis on the “renewing” and generative “capacities of the carnival,” Lai argues that the runaway Naoe’s rejection of her mundane rocking chair begins her embrace of the “time of carnival,” the contrast of old age with fertility itself a central “carnival principle” (142-47). With Naoe’s masturbation in the mushroom barn a “carnavalesque adventure,” this “sexual grotesque” is one of two carnival aspects; the other is that of “grotesque feasting” (149). Goto aims to reclaim and revalorize Japanese food, imbuing it, Lai claims, with “the power of a kind of magical transformation” (149). Naoe’s gender-bending reincarnation as the Purple Mask in the Stampede, a civic ritual that is itself carnivalized, is for Lai the ultimate carnivalized moment, one that confers agency to an elderly Japanese Canadian woman usually deemed marginal (150-51).

While the concept of the carnivalesque in this context is persuasive, books by Goto and Lai might also be termed *magic realism*, given the term’s history and efficacy in cultures outside the literary mainstream and, as Stephen Slemon suggests, its use as resistance within postcolonial contexts (9-10). Slemon proposes that in the “language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other” (409). Such “binary opposition” (409) between the magical and marvelous on one hand and social and economic realism on the other allows for a literary hybridity that seeks to reauthorize oral traditions in the face of Western modernity’s delegitimizing of them. The opposition between the fantastic and the realistic in Lai’s and Goto’s texts also shows an awareness of what the authors of *Transnational Poetics* call “the power of fiction as a strategy for transformation” (Cuder-Domiguez et al. 86). In fostering in their novels the reading of myth and magic, fable and fantasy, Goto and Lai revamp the conventions of the genre by expanding its limits.



In keeping with the nature of oral stories, Goto and Lai also juxtapose the past with the present in a fusion of myth, folklore, and history on one hand and more contemporary stories set in the ancestral homelands and in Canada on the other. Ong suggests that because primary oral cultures have no prior experience of “lengthy, epic-size or novel-size climactic linear plot[s],” oral narratives are usually devoid of strict, chronological, and climactic order (138-40), weaving through past, present, and future indiscriminately with no apparent plan. In *Slanting I, Imagining We*, Lai demonstrates that Goto’s “alternative temporality” often involves Naoe, including her entry into “being in time” by taking Tengu, the Japanese-speaking cowboy, as lover, and her mesmerizing of crowds as the bull-riding Purple Mask (144). Further, Goto’s use of the invocation “Mukāshi, mukāshi, ōmukāshi,” translated previously as “in ancient times, in ancient times, in very ancient times,” stretches the distance between past and present while collapsing the two. For Lai, “Naoe’s English speech is not of ancient time, but of the present—an alternative present in which such speech is possible” (146). Goto’s eternal “now” thus fuses ancient voices with present wisdom to imply alternate truths and multiple stories (146).

This alternative temporality or non-linear/chronological telling is also seen in Goto’s mix of personal and national histories, and what she in her narrative calls “a ghost story” (*CM* 169), “a love story” (183), and “an immigrant story with a happy ending” (159, 211). Sequential time is exploded as Naoe’s recall of the past is constantly merged with Murasaki’s accounts of the present. Naoe’s tales, often told to Murasaki, recover history, both hers and Japan’s, and remember a conflicted existence marked by the poverty of her once-landed family, her separation from them, and turbulent phases in her country’s past. Telling of the expected American invasion by boat during the Second World War, she notes the surprise bombing instead of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “only they come, they come, not from the sea, but thunder in the sky above us, B-29s, huge, swollen with their cargo,

in deadly formation, dropping destruction. Fire bombs, pitching sheets of incredible heat, melting everything, even metal, even stone. The fire roaring and swelling, cresting like a tidal wave to engulf us all” (51). Naoe reports that the human consequences were horrific, with the survivors, in the aftermath of the devastation, standing in the “embers of our homes and only ask[ing], ‘Is there water? Is there food?’ and ‘Who is still alive?’ *Gisei*. That is what we called Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those people. The children, the infants, the elderly, the women. Sacrifice” (52-53). Naoe humanizes the repercussions of this bombing. Such emphasis on the victims, with this history told from a survivor’s angle, counterstories master narratives of Allied power, continuing to raise with every reading of her book ethical objections to the Americans’ use of atomic bombs during the Second World War.

Whereas Naoe’s stories focus on her past set against Japan’s wars and economic chaos, and her survival of these tragedies, Murasaki’s are set closer to the present, recounting her second-generation immigrant experience growing up in Alberta. Her personal and cultural chronicles emphasize struggles with racism and sexism that impinge on notions of self and relationships: her sense that there is something wrong with the Valentine cards she receives with the stereotypical rendering of a slit-eyed Japanese girl in a kimono and sandals, with chopsticks in her hair (62), or her confusion over a boyfriend’s expectations of Oriental sex and his insistence that “You’re Oriental aren’tcha?” that leaves her protesting, “Not really [...]. I think I’m Canadian” (122). Amidst the dominant culture’s exoticizing of those of Asian heritage, Murasaki’s stories challenge Orientalist constructions and homogenous representations that have profoundly debilitating effects. Her response—“I’m Canadian”—is identity-constituting, allowing her to deny the majority culture’s incorrect evaluations of her so she can assert her own worth.

Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand* is also a fascinating amalgamation of history and contemporary reality. The absence of chronology that Ong suggests is true of oral lore seems evident in Lai's story, which moves through time indiscriminately. Using the narrative voices of the T'ang Dynasty poet Yu Hsuan-Chi and a third-person narrator limited to the perspective of Artemis, a young Asian North American woman living in contemporary Vancouver, in addition to the voice of the Fox, Lai constantly shifts from past to present, revisiting the traumas experienced by women in the past while she tells stories anchored on the dilemmas of women in the present. Robyn Morris, in reference to Lai's novel, states that "[t]his melding of ancient spirits and ancient bodies with contemporary student life emphasizes not only the historical continuity of the female story, but also the importance of the past in the formation of a bicultural identity in a specifically mono-Canadian present" ("Revisioning Representations of Difference" 71). Morris's use of the word "female" prior to "story" may be problematic, "gendering" an otherwise neutral subject, but it underscores Lai's attempts to foreground the experience of Asian women through what she says is a "trail of ideologically determined stories left by a trail of ideologically motivated historians and translators, whose agendas and ways of storying and telling have also changed over time" (Interview). Lai herself adds to that trail; in her story, Fox brings with it the history of the haunting of the ninth-century Taoist poet-nun who, according to historical records, was accused of having murdered the young servant who once worked for her. Lai fills in gaps in the story and fictionalizes the poet's relationships with women, continuing through time the ideologically determined stories in *When Fox Is a Thousand*. Lai also uses the empress's story to make, according to Luo, "an important connection between the historical stories and the contemporary lives in the novel, as the story of the empress disconcertingly parallels aspects of the lives of both major characters, the poetess and Artemis, and their respective women friends" (123). Indeed, the empress—a likely allusion to Wu

Zetian, the only female emperor in China in several thousands of years—embodies the timelessness of ruthless female power.

## CONCLUSION

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Lai's and Goto's writings of the oral are inseparable from their projects of negotiating identity and location in diaspora. As with Murasaki and Naoe who, inheriting an oral tradition, learn to articulate themselves through it, Lai and Goto claim cultural difference as power and cultural fusions as richness, their (re)presentations potent against structures and institutions that attempt to silence and damage their voices and stories. Reclaiming the remnants of their Asian cultures, and merging these with North American traditions, they participate in the making of a hybrid culture in Canada. Such adaptations transform their novels into what Schorcht calls "cross-cultural, storied conversations, constructing dialogues between [two] cultural worldviews" (12). Their cultural politics, identity negotiations, and interrogations of generic fixity assume inventive forms, not only dismantling in the process the rigid social categories of Asian and Canadian but also recasting the mythic figure of the Asian woman. In their simulations of orality and use of textualized orature, they defend themselves discursively against forms of imperialism, and alter others' oppressive valuations of them, which is step two of Nelson's counterstorying. Their rewriting is thus narrative repair that not only resists and dissents from prevailing practices and assumptions, refusing their damages, but also insists on self-definition and a shift in cultural understanding.

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**“A DIFFERENT TELLING”:  
NARRATIVE AND DISCURSIVE APPROACHES**

*How does one write about these vibrant differences or rich experiences and histories ...? Does one use the language of its experience...? Is the public language of the adopted country, standard English, the appropriate choice? And more profoundly, I wonder too if there is language enough in any of these to resurrect their stories or feelings through such an expanse of space and time, of destruction and coercive forgetting. What about the untranslatable ruptures and fragments—the unknowable—that fail to cross the borderlands of these social or cultural systems or languages?*

—Wendy Ho, *In Her Mother’s House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing*, 24

In questioning whether to use an ancestral tongue or the public language of an adopted country to write one’s story, Wendy Ho emphasizes the importance of the language of communication (24). Could either language on its own adequately express the victories, violences, and vulnerabilities of one’s experience? Is silence as much as speech itself a rhetorical strategy of protest? Choices about language and speech carry political implications and possibilities for repair; they embody what Ho calls “subjectivity, identity, and community,” (re)constituting narratives as privileged sites for cultural, psychosocial, historical articulations of the self and shaping them as spaces of “recreation or resistance” (108). Exploring these strategies in the writings of Anita Rau Badami, Denise Chong, Kerri Sakamoto, and Hiromi Goto, this chapter examines linguistic and narrative practices and calls attention not only to the binary opposition frequently posited between speech and silence, but also to the notion that silence is itself a form of discourse, a rhetorical strategy constructing identities for Asian North American female characters.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Patti Duncan suggests, “finding a voice,” “breaking silence” and “speaking out’ against oppression and injustice” have become terms of liberatory rhetoric, the aspirations of emancipation located within the very discourses about speech (7). Duncan argues in *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* that “speech itself represents liberation, while in opposition to speech, silence represents both the precondition and the very foundation of oppression” (7). Where speech and language signify “visibility, gain, presence, liberation, and ‘truth,’” silence denotes “invisibility, loss, absence, repression, oppression, the unspoken, the unknown” (7). King-Kok Cheung in *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* also claims that silence is often equated with “absence,” or using Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike’s formulation, as “the ground against which the figure of talk is perceived” (xi). Because according to Cheung, feminist analyses often “valorize speech and equate voice with subjectivity, reducing silence to non-subjectivity,” Asian American women’s silences in particular situations have often been understood within the context of a “lack” of that subjectivity (xi). However, while speech is important, strategic silence can also be telling and can contribute to narrative repair.

With Asian North Americans long excluded in any significant way from official histories and with women in particular rarely heard in those histories, discussions of voice assume significance. They continue to be central to Asian Canadian women’s significations of subjectivity and agency, with their narratives often seen as validating their attempts at “breaking into voice,” at speaking, especially against totalizing histories that obscure their experiences. In linking speech and silence to visibility and invisibility, Mitsuye Yamada, in her article “Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism,” exhorts such women to “make ourselves more visible by speaking out on the condition of our sex and race and on certain political issues which concern us” (71), even if speech is

frequently “neither guaranteed nor necessarily liberating” (Duncan ix). Misconceptions about silence in the context of women of Asian origin in North America—equating it only to passivity, obedience, docility, and a lack of subjective power—negate the possibility that silence, as Duncan posits, can also be a “refusal to participate in the dominant narrativizing apparatuses that have excluded them and a form of resistance to ... official historical record[s]” (ix). It is this dual focus that I intend to discuss in this chapter.

Speech and silence frequently appear as central tropes in Asian North American women’s narratives. For years, Maxine Hong Kingston’s narrator-protagonist in *The Woman Warrior* struggled with the injunction “don’t tell,” particularly as it shrouded a complex legacy of family secrets and a repressed cultural history. Patricia Chu observes that when Kingston as author finally counters this resistance to narration, telling her mother’s stories and imagining the untold story behind her father’s curse, she actually writes of “a struggle in which speech and authorship are both symbolic of and instrumental to survival and the fullness of being” (2). This contrasting of speech and silence also grounds *Obasan*, Kogawa’s text on the Second World War relocation and internment of Japanese Canadians. Aunt Emily’s call for voice is liberating; Emily believes that what continues to paralyze internment survivors into “complicitous silence” is the shame of being victims of an atrocity. “Such shame,” as Kogawa reveals in her novel, “must be challenged, such silence finally broken” (87). Laurie Kruk notes, however, that although *Obasan*, Naomi’s other aunt, is silenced by her lack of political power and knowledge of English, the dominant language in Canada, it is she more than “word warrior” Emily (Kogawa 32), who wordlessly assists Naomi’s descent into memory and begins her psychological and spiritual rebirth (Kruk 84-86).

Writing out of both Asian and North American literary traditions, Badami, Chong, Lai, Goto, and Sakamoto also engage with the experience and politics of speech and silence, their narratives

telling of women often silenced not only by gender but also by culture, class, and negative racialization. Cheung suggests that this silence “can be induced by the family in an attempt to maintain dignity or secrecy; by the ethnic community in adherence to cultural etiquette; or by the dominant culture in an effort to prevent any voicing of minority experiences” (3). Chong’s May-ying, Badami’s Saroja, Goto’s Naoe, and Sakamoto’s Asako exemplify all three strands of female silencing: the family’s shame about May-ying’s past shrouds her story in silence and dishonours her memory; Saroja is frequently silenced by a community that privileges men’s voices over women’s; and Naoe and Asako constantly negotiate the divide between silence and speech as they struggle against the dominant culture’s biases against the female Asian elder and spinster. As Mari Peepre observes in reference to *The Concubine’s Children*, “[o]nly in the third generation of granddaughters is the burden of an unspeakable past finally cast off by the narrating voice” (82), with the third generation thus effecting repair of the female individual and group identities. These second- and third-generation narrators—Hing’s daughter Denise in *The Concubine’s Children*, Saroja’s daughter Kamini in *Tamarind Mem*, and Naoe’s granddaughter Murasaki in *A Chorus of Mushrooms*—break these “undesirable silences,” which Cheung describes as “the speechlessness induced by shame and guilt, the oppressive or protective withholding of words in the family, or the glaring oversight in official history” (20). Resisting damaging master narratives, Chong, Badami, and Goto thus articulate revisionist histories of Asian diaspora and Asian female experience in Canada and Asia, their claiming of voice also a celebration of personal and cultural identities.

The first part of this chapter considers one end of the spectrum—speech—with the first section looking at the ways in which Chong, Badami, Sakamoto, and Goto privilege their ancestral tongues by inserting these into the narrative’s standard Canadian English. In other words, they practice *code-switching*, a “movement between two languages that ... represents the power to own



but not be owned by language” (Pratt 177). In contrast, the next section debates the common assumption that silence exemplifies submission and passivity, both congruent with the association, according to Cheung, of “Asian quietness with femininity or inscrutability” (169). Silence has significant impact not only as a trope but also as a rhetorical strategy in *The Electrical Field* because the silent character, Asako, is also the narrator, and her silences wield much narrative power. She unsettles the reader by withholding details that she does not herself want to remember, and she allows the reader access to particular views of her not by her own articulation, but by quoting other characters’ words about her. *The Electrical Field* thus discredits the notion that verbal eloquence is essential to communication. A text such as Sakamoto’s—deliberately riddled with gaps, contradictions, and fragments, and yet articulate—can willfully circumvent traditional constraints on speaking despite the silences imposed by gender, class, culture, and negative racialization, demonstrating that, as this chapter will show, women can articulate their experiences not only through speech but also through strategic silence.

## CODE-SWITCHING

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*When the ambivalent, split subalterns become fully aware of the continuity between syntax of imperialism and imperialism of syntax, they are ready to charge out of the syntax of imperialism, transforming the indeterminate, ambivalent, sporadic, fragmented text of the diasporic into a fountainhead of counter-hegemonic agency. This is the moment of writing on boundaries when the transgressive writing collapses linguistics which holds on to grammar, syntax, and logic, hence turning the English language into a resignifying system.*

— Shaobo Xie, “Rememory, Reinscription, Resignification: Strategies of Decolonization in Chinese Canadian Literature,” 358

The recuperative projects of Badami, Goto, Sakamoto, and Chong involve code-switching, most commonly defined as the concurrent use of more than one language in speech or writing, or what Mary Louise Pratt describes as “speech danc[ing] fluidly and strategically back and forth

between two languages and two cultural systems (“Yo Soy la Malinche,” 177).<sup>38</sup> Code-switching enables the authors to construct a mode of speaking not from a liminal position between English and their ancestral languages, but in the heteroglossia of both languages. Interrupting the English language with words or phrases from their mother tongues, they acknowledge their Asian heritages as integral to their experiences, draw in readers interested in learning more about Asian or Asian Canadian cultures, and position non-Asian readers as outsiders, similar to how immigrants are frequently figured as outsiders to a culture whose language they do not understand. Such subversion of standard English is part of what Edward Said terms, in *Culture and Imperialism*, the postcolonial “voyage in,” which goes “into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories” (216). As Shaobo Xie argues, code-switching can become resistance, a gesture undermining the “syntax of imperialism” and transforming the master’s language into a “resignifying system” (358) that disrupts homogenous perspectives, challenges imperializing linguistic standardization, and recognizes pluralism in the significant project of the recovery of culture and being.

In *Tamarind Mem* Badami renders Hindi words in italics, usually words that denote cultural practices related to food, customs, and traditions. Appealing to the senses, her descriptions conjure local smells, sights, and tastes, as when Kamini acknowledges that she was only “too happy to sit in the *chik*-shaded room smelling deliciously of wet *khus* mats dripping against the cooler, like the first monsoon rain on parched earth” (65). The feast of flavors and the delectable assortment of food mentioned in the narrative are presented in Hindi—“*aloo-dum*” (48), “*sooji-halwah* rich with raisins” (47), “hot *phulkas*” (48), “a huge pot of cashew *halwa*,” or a “pot of jackfruit *payasa*” or “*ghee*” or “*ganji-bhaath*” (67)—and this distinct vocabulary transports North American readers to India even as it dismantles and decolonizes the diction of majority North American culture.<sup>39</sup> By not

including a glossary at the end of the novel, nor definitions or explanations of the Hindi words within her narrative, Badami risks excluding non-Hindi-speaking audiences, but the practice clearly marks her desire to preserve a sense of her cultural identity. It also codes that cultural difference positively, in phrases like “*sooji-halwah* rich with raisins” that celebrate Badami’s culture (47). Her refusal to pander to insular North Americans, reminding those readers instead of the narrator’s cultural difference, or perhaps of the reader’s otherness to Hindu Indian culture, privileges her minority heritage and language.

In Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Naoe’s blending of the oral and the aural replicates in italicized Japanese words the sounds of nature: “I remember so well, the soft spring breeze rustling *midori* green bamboo leaves. *Sara sara sara*. Gentle as wish, as thought and certainly no need to challenge it with my voice. A breath of leaves. My sticky child feet slapping *bata bata* the freshly laid *tatami* sweet as straw. ... [W]e were waiting. ... For the cicadas to cry *tsuku tsuku boshi*, *tsuku tsuku boshi* and the cat to jump up on the veranda” (5, original italics). Such code-switching creates linguistic solidarity among Japanese Canadians, distancing them from others, but also transforms Naoe’s narrative into a cultural feast for the ears.

Emphasizing language as a site of struggle, but also of vindication, Naoe’s code-switching mocks the dominant culture’s assumption about elderly Asians’ ineptitude in English. She refutes such generalization with her mastery and competence in two languages: “No one moves in this house without meeting my eyes. Hearing my voice. ... I’ll nod and smile. Welcome! Welcome! Into this pit of dust. This bowl of heat. *Ohairi kudasai! Dōzo ohairi kudasai*” (4, original italics). Of significance is the fact that Goto, more than the other writers in this study, adds to her linguistic mix full sentences of transliterated Japanese, frequently several at one time and always italicized. To adapt Mary Louise Pratt’s term from *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, this

practice makes Goto's a writing and speaking in the linguistic "contact zone." Naoe's competence in both languages demonstrates that her problem is not a lack of language, but that the language imposed on her by her family and community in Canada does not accommodate her liminal experience. Her code-switching then becomes what Xie suggests, in her discussion of Chinese Canadian writers, an attempt "to disengage herself from that agonizing double-bind of hybridity. To make room with words is to decolonize, for opening spaces with revalorized words is not only to give form to amorphous, repressed feelings and sensibilities, but more importantly, it is to break out of the prison-house of the colonizer's language, to negotiate and reinscribe the hybridized identity of the diasporic" (357). Adulterating the colonizer's syntax with revalued language from one's culture is a dismantling of the hegemonic culture, collapsing its power over the marginalized, as it is a reclaiming of the diasporic subject's selfhood. Such writing becomes a form of resistance that Gilles Deleuze describes as "[c]onquer[ing] the major language in order to delineate it in as yet unknown minor languages. Us[ing] the minor language to *send the major language racing*" (116, original italics). Goto's inclusion of Japanese in a predominantly English text shifts attention away from the major language to the minor, stripping standard English of some of its power, decentring it, and evolving a new language from the mix of both minor and major tongues. Her mastery and manipulation of both languages validates Pratt's assertion that code-switching "lays claim to a form of subaltern cultural power: I own both your language and mine, the minority speaker says; both are mine to combine and recombine as I choose" ("Yo Soy" 177). Goto's code-switching thus not only recognizes her Japanese language, but emphasizes a linguistic syncretism that inventively rearticulates a notion of the Asian self in an Anglophone diasporic location.

Goto also uses other linguistic forms of translation. In discussing the concept of translation in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Shao-Pin Luo, calls attention to Goto's use of the word *Tonkatsu*,

Murasaki's family name and also a Japanese deep-fried, breaded pork cutlet. Luo argues that instead of being "a token of loss" (quoting Mark Libin 124) of "a forgotten language, *Tonkatsu* is a hybrid word that is half Japanese and half English, not really a 'purely Japanese word'" (Luo 118, quoting *CM* 209). As Murasaki's father explains, "*Ton*, meaning pork, is Japanese, but *katsu* is adopted from 'cutlet'" (*CM* 209). Murasaki herself, although not able to understand Japanese, learns to "translate" Naoe's stories, and when she does learn Japanese, she delights in her ability to "juggle two languages" (54), with each ultimately borrowing from the other. Dialogues supposed to be in Japanese are transcribed in English (*CM* 187, 196-97), which creates a "pseudo translation" almost like subtitles to indicate that there is another language in the narrative (Luo 118). In a conversation with her lover, for instance, Murasaki signals her surprise at his facility in English, knowing that, since his arrival, he had not taken an English class: "'[Y]ou're so fluent, I don't even notice an accent when we're talking together.' He looked incredulously at me. 'But when I speak with you, I only speak in Japanese. *Jibun de wakaranai no? Itsumo Nihongo de hanashiteiru noni...*' 'Oh'" (*CM* 187). The passage insists on another language informing the narrative, what Mark Libin terms a "language of difference" (122) that, according to Luo, "opens up ambiguous space between knowing and not knowing, understanding and not understanding, translating and not translating" (119). It is communication that makes comprehension possible even when different languages are spoken.<sup>40</sup>

In *The Concubine's Children*, Chong uses italicized and transliterated Cantonese to emphasize aspects critical to the narrative, such as social and cultural practices and especially relationships (*Daipo*, *Baba*) and aspects of local cuisine (*dim sum*, *sewyeh*, *hoi sin*) (30, 50, 132, 113). This inclusion of Cantonese calls attention to the language and culture of her ancestors, affirming long-denied allegiances. More often than Badami, Goto, or Sakamoto, Chong translates

her mother tongue, offering definitions after the terms. Chong often places the definition within parentheses after the word itself: “Chan Sam’s father was grateful that his years abroad had been fat. He had made ten times what he might have had he not gone, enough to buy some thirty *mau tin* (one *mau tin* equals less than one-sixth of an acre of cultivated land), enough to have a second child, a third and a fourth” (15). She also occasionally employs a technique known as *cushioning* (Gyasi 147), which embeds a translation of the word or words within the grammar of the sentence itself: “If there was one Chinese law of the universe, it was loyalty to *gee gay yun*, to one’s own people” (21). In another example, Chong clarifies assumptions made about May-ying’s gambling and drinking: “she was *lan doh* and *lan yum*, one who would gamble and drink until she was broken to pieces” (111). Such embedded glossing compensates in part for the lack of a structured glossary, allowing non-Cantonese readers the opportunity to understand the meaning of words, phrases, or sentences, and for those particularly interested in other languages to learn new vocabulary. Still, frequently, Chong leaves many of her Cantonese words untranslated, as when, for example, she writes that May-ying is told by Auntie, the matchmaker, that she has “found [her] a *ho muen*” (8), explaining to May-ying that “I am only doing what is best for you. I want you to have *on lock cha fan*” (9). Auntie further makes clear Chan Sam’s intentions by noting that “[h]e has a *Dai-po* in Heung San,” and stating that “he wants to have a *chip see* in *Gum San*” (9). While these words’ meanings may not be difficult to find, particularly now through internet search capabilities, these untranslated terms still disrupt a predominantly English text and demand that the reader take some steps toward understanding them.

Chong’s code-switching recognizes her Chinese heritage as integral to her experience, and validates her text as Chinese Canadian. It also offers a gesture of resistance, what Carol Eastman, in reference to Monica Heller’s use of code-switching, states is the “entry point to explore the way

dominant groups use language choice to maintain power, while subordinate groups variously acquiesce or resist, redefine the meaning of choice, or alter the value of linguistic choices as resources in the marketplace” (Eastman 10). Chong’s code-switching thus becomes an effective strategy, which, as Xie suggests in the case of other Chinese Canadian writers, “turns cultural hybridity and indeterminacy into a fountainhead of counter-hegemonic agency, dwelling both in and outside the colonizer’s syntax” (353). Such writing practices, according to Xie, “challeng[e], undermin[e], and dismantl[e] dominant culture” (353) to speak of difference and identity.

Like Chong, Sakamoto translates some of her Japanese words within the same or the following sentence, as when she writes, “we nihonjin, we Japanese” (*TEF* 1), but unlike the other writers in this study, she does not italicize transliterated Japanese words. Asako as narrator states that her family “rarely had guests, let alone hakujin” (125), recalling at one time a “New Year’s gochiso, our feast” (159). Sakamoto’s linguistic hybridizing is thus more fluid; there is no marking of Japanese as “foreign.” Her diglossia, however, still functions as a diasporic strategy to acknowledge a multicultural present in Canada. Her code-switching of terms particular to culture and society legitimizes her ancestral tongue, rendering it parallel in value to standard English.<sup>41</sup> For example, explaining that she does not miss Japan, the secondary character Chisako tells Asako that “[n]ihonjin are so ... .’ She searched for the word, wrinkling her nose in distaste. ‘So ... seigen suru. Wakarimasu-ka? Do you understand, Saito-san?... So stiff’” (118, first two ellipses in original). Importing her mother tongue almost seamlessly into the dominant language and into a new cultural context, Sakamoto’s code-switching blurs linguistic boundaries so that she and her characters can be simultaneously Japanese and Canadian, their hybridized identities obvious in their writing and speaking across languages. Sakamoto’s refusal of linguistic binarizing may help to effect narrative repair.

Whether or not the ancestral language is rendered in italics, code-switching for Chong, Badami, Goto and Sakamoto functions to mobilize language to express a bicultural experience. Such “cultural amphibianism”—a term Mari Sasano coins in his discussion of Goto’s code-switching (5)—allows readers access to both languages and to two cultures. It also recalls what Michel de Certeau has written about colonized people subverting a colonial system “not by rejecting or altering [its language], but by using [it] with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were *other* within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power” (xiii). Writing in English, yet manipulating it to their purposes, subsuming the text’s authority by infusing it with their ancestral tongues, these women writers demonstrate their refusal to allow a hegemonic culture to silence and deny them the multiplicity of their languages and experiences.

## SILENCE AS STRATEGY

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*With speech comes silence—not simply the forgotten, the denied or the disavowed but also the refusal, the protest, or the resistance that silence might also signify.*

— Wendy Ho, *In Her Mother’s House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing*, 29

As with speech, silence is a trope in North American liberation and social-justice movements, which include feminist; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered; civil rights; and antiracist struggles, and date back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feminist and African, Asian, Latina, and Native North American activists were then advocates of “speaking out” and distancing themselves from silences that may “imply consent to subjugation” and preserve the power hierarchy (Duncan 7). Ascribing power and liberation to speech and weakness and oppression to silence can be troubling; it casts silence as homogenous, its many forms identical in their association with submission and



suppression. The correlation of silence with victimization fails to consider silence as also having alternative meaning and purposes. Silence, as Duncan argues, is “not simply loss, lack, absence, or repression. As a will to unsay, it is also that which makes speaking, or saying, possible, as it constructs and shapes meaning” (30). Especially for Asians in North America, silence can be resistance to their enforced servitude and invisibility because, according to Duncan, “[c]hoosing not to speak, when such speech is induced by oppressors, can be seen as a clear refusal to be dominated” (218). It thus becomes, in Wendy Ho’s terms, dissent, a form of “refusal,” “protest,” or “resistance” (29), or as Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, “a language of its own [that] has barely been explored” (373).<sup>42</sup>

As noted earlier, linking speech with authority and silence with passivity also aligns speech and silence with established, structured, and predictable hierarchies of power. This Eurocentric privileging becomes especially problematic within the context of another polarizing: the West vis-à-vis the East, with the West frequently stereotyped as articulate and assertive and the East as quiet, even inscrutable, and docile. For example, according to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Western feminist frameworks,” produce representations of the “average third world woman” as “lead[ing] an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)” (*Third World Women* 56). In contrast, “the (implicit) self-representation of Western women,” is as “educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (56) and to speak. In her article on silence in Asian North American writing, Cheung denounces this polarizing, deeming it damaging to Asians in North America, especially in positing them as inscrutable (2) but also in excluding them from dominant discourses.

Sakamoto's simultaneous embrace and challenge of these assumptions transform *The Electrical Field* into a fractured narrative, with the unspeakable and the unspoken often expressed and emphasized by their very absence from the text.<sup>43</sup> The often inarticulate Asako Saiko, the novel's narrator, repressed not only verbally but also emotionally, psychologically, and sexually, symbolizes Japanese Canadians who were victimized by the Second World War internment, and what Coral Ann Howells calls their "traumatized identities" ("Contemporary Canadian Women's" 7). Except for her neighbours Yano and Chisako, other Japanese Canadians in Asako's community live quiet, if dispirited, existences, indifferent to Yano's redress efforts. Their silence may be related to their peripheral locations in the novel, literally and figuratively. Charlotte Sturgess, in "Writing the Outsider Within: Interned Language in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*," contends that the book explores the "seemingly untenable proposition of being an 'outsider within'" (91). This emotional view is represented in the characters' physical position, "cut off from the rest of the town by a stretch of waste ground full of giant electricity pylons" and "dominated by Mackenzie hill in homage to the Prime Minister in power at the time of internment" (91-92). Such "racialised topography inscribing distances and separations" emphasizes "a history that is not addressed frontally: that of the Japanese community's ambivalent positioning" (92), particularly with respect to power and control. The internment was alternatively seen by Japanese Canadians as relocation, evacuation, and settlement or displacement and incarceration, the semantic changes also betraying differing perspectives—such as Asako's and Yano's—that polarize the community vis-à-vis the Canadian government. Such ambiguity can be inhibiting to redress efforts.

*The Electrical Field* engages with silence thematically, but Sakamoto also mobilizes silence as a method, paradoxically using it to say and to speak. She joins Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong-Kingston, and Joy Kogawa, who, according to Cheung, question, report, and expose the silences

imposed in the forms of feminine and cultural decorum, external or self-censorship, and historical or political invisibility. Cheung suggests that these authors reveal that silences—textual ellipses, nonverbal gestures, authorial hesitations about assertions of moral, historical, religious, or political authority—can also be articulate (3-4). Not only subject to the hegemonic culture’s “white gaze” and to its upholding of “minority silence,” but also to a “communal gaze” that demands the “propriety of reticence,” these writers have developed “methods of indirection that reflect their female, racial, and bicultural legacies” (16). The Asian woman’s double powerlessness in terms of gender and negative racialization also results in her imposed silence; as Cheung explains, “verbal restraint, often inculcated in both Chinese and Japanese cultures and reinforced as a survival strategy in the face of racism in the corresponding immigrant communities, hardly prepares a child for vocal assertion, especially when she is perceived as the Other” (6). The adoption of strategies of silence—those primarily agential and made as conscious choices—indicates some women writers’ skepticism about language and textual authority (5). These “strategies of reticence,” to use Janice Stout’s term, include those often employed by women to articulate the inexpressible—irony, hedging, coded language, muted plots (4)—but also devices like “dream, fantasy, and unreliable point of view” and the methods of open-endedness and multiplicity, of verbal withholding (5).

Sakamoto’s strategies of indirection include employing double-voiced discourses, multiple plots, elliptical narration, gaps and fissures, and references to dreams, memory, and fantasy. All these modes reinforce silence, while using it, in Duncan’s terms, “to emerge as a way of telling a different story, a method of unsaying” (219). The text’s “double-voiced discourse” is produced especially through Sakamoto’s mixing of fact and fiction and her layering of a dominant murder-suicide plot over the story of Asako’s self-discovery, which is itself layered over versions of historical experiences during the incarceration of the Japanese in Canada during the Second World

War. Elaine Showalter writes that such discourse occurs when “the orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint” (266). This discourse also becomes, according to Cheung’s understanding of the term, an author’s circumvention of authoritarian narration and the signification of the instability of “truth” and “history,” as it juxtaposes varying perspectives, interposing “memory” and “counter-memory” (15). Sakamoto’s narrative about the murders and suicide within Asako’s Japanese community animates *The Electrical Field* with the suspense of a “whodunit” mystery, while questioning not “who” but “why.” Asako’s inability to confront truth, rendering problematic the nature of her past and those versions of history that define it, is compelling, but Sakamoto’s readers must probe beneath the surface and peel away the layers of more dominant narratives to catch the inexpressible: versions of the internment experience related thirty years after the event itself. In offering a viable alternative to the internment story, these obscured fragments or insubordinate narratives challenge the legitimacy of a totalizing master narrative, asserting instead that histories are multiple, complex, and heterogeneous.

Duncan suggests that silences are a repudiation of official accounts of the internment of Japanese North Americans during the Second World War, which “operate as powerful indictments of the historical record and a refusal to be erased from history,” becoming a “metaphor” for lived realities (218-19). The forced incarceration and relocation of Japanese Canadians involved a misrepresentation of some stories and an erasure of others. Sakamoto’s versions legitimize the perspectives of the internment’s often unheard victims, emphasizing the importance of not silencing or forgetting their stories of intergenerational trauma. Referring to the confinement of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia, the confiscation of their property, and the choice of deportation or transfer to other parts of Canada on the grounds of national security, Yano decries the federal

government's abuse of power: "These hakujin think they can do anything they please .... We're just mushi they can squash.' He swiped at the air as if to catch a fly. 'Same old story, right?'" (*TEF* 259). Yano's statement puts into play both story and counterstory: it presents the EuroCanadian judgment of Japanese Canadians as not respectable and then reverses that judgment. Slipping into a familiar rant, Yano recalls with Asako how dire the circumstances were during the war, stating, "[t]hey were hoping we'd all commit hara-kiri in the camps. ... People say it wasn't so bad. Easy to say now. But it was bad" (258). He also notes how devastating the repercussions were for the Japanese: "You know, Saito-san, there were a few who did kill themselves. Out of shame" (258). Yano, among other characters, offers a "counter memory" that in Michel Foucault's use of the term resists official versions of historical continuity, "opposes history as knowledge," and unmasks "knowledge as perspective" (160, 156). Sakamoto thus disturbs established notions of history, interrogating official dominant narratives of the internment and drawing attention to the victims' silenced voices and experiences, which, even in her text, only appear as fragmented and isolated.

Yano's allegiances are expressed in his tirades against the federal government and the oppressions of the internment, but Asako's affiliations remain more ambiguous, particularly in her resistance to the kind of discourse Yano offers. Her ambivalence is emphasized in her inability to articulate herself, demonstrating not only the displacement of an aging, unmarried woman grappling with her sexuality, but also the dispossession of a Japanese Canadian struggling with the repercussions of the internment, unable to reconcile her losses. Her refusal to align herself with Yano's sentiments betrays the threat that narrating the internment experience represents to Asako's self-concept, demonstrating how much she is clearly in need of narrative repair.

As the narrator and central character in the novel, Asako is critical to Sakamoto's mobilization of silence as a strategy. Her language deficiency translates to multiple gaps and

ellipses, emphasizing a repressed female-centred subjectivity. Asako herself explains her inability to communicate: “All my life, what I’d felt had been the promise of nothing. The risk of nothing, which had frozen me to ice. Even as a child, as a girl adoring her older, handsome brother, I had been capable of great restraint” (*TEF* 209). Her reserve contrasts markedly with Yano’s wife Chisako’s unabashed reporting of her romance with her work supervisor, but also “her anger, her venom” (213) about the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “‘My wish is for the bomb to drop on the ones who did it. ... Just because we’re nihonjin, they think they can do anything to us.’ Her hands clenched and shook. She reminded [Asako] of Yano, the hands in fists, the anger” (213). Chisako’s intensity is matched by Yano’s determined efforts to lift internment survivors from their torpor, even if “few, if at all, have been converted by his efforts.” As Chisako explains, people “never come to his redress meetings. All he does is talk about the war and the camps when they just want to forget” (24). This collective disinterest and inertia, like Asako’s failure of speech, suggest an impotence both literal and figurative; they are similar to the unspeakability that Judith Lewis Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, claims is noted in psychological trauma. The tension between forgetting and confronting negative experiences usually results in rejecting them from the consciousness, but because they are far from dormant, the acknowledgement, acceptance, and articulation of these events become the preconditions for healing (1).

Asako’s elision of details about the effects of the internment and dispersal is just one part of a narrative filled with admissions of verbal inadequacy: “I wanted to say, but I didn’t” (93); “I strained for words, some small offhand comment, some adept change of subject, but could find nothing. My voice had drained away” (214); or “My mouth was open but nothing came out, just a hole catching the blackness in the room” (99). Such reticence may stem from formative childhood experiences, including her guilt over her brother’s death and anguish at the loss experienced by her

family during their internment. She thus becomes a muted sufferer, proceeding tentatively, the gaps in her speech, thoughts, and memories resulting in a muted, fractured, and often elliptical narrative.

What Eva Darias-Beautell calls Asako's "feeble textual reconstruction of a narrative of absence" ("Graphies" 30) is doubly disturbing because it suggests her desire not to articulate difficult subjects, even to herself. For example, describing a conversation with Yano, she narrates: "He was shaking his head in agitation. 'We're so full of shame, aren't we, Asako? We hide away, afraid that they'll lock us up again. That's it, isn't it?' I could think of no way to respond. I nodded my head sadly, knowing whatever I said would have no effect on him. 'That was such a long time ago, Yano,' I said. 'Things have changed in thirty years' " (*TEF* 231). Asako unsettles the reader by withholding details she herself wants to forget even as she also allows the reader access to multiple views of herself by quoting the words of others about her, as when Yano tells her that "I can see it in you too" and "You hide in your house taking care of Papa and little brother. You should get on with life" (231-32). Because other characters speak for her, offering interpretations, reasons, and motivations for her actions, her silences have particular power for the reader. Such power depends in no small part on the reader being able to "hear" that she is articulate in her silent narration; hence, these failures of speech are more eloquent than words, capturing poignantly the trauma of the internment for female Japanese Canadians like Asako.

In her essay "Cartographies of Struggle," Mohanty writes that "not only must narratives of resistance undo hegemonic recorded history, but they must also invent new forms of encoding resistance, of remembering" (35). For Sakamoto, the imperative to remember and to resist involves revisiting Japanese Canadian history and unmasking the distortions in official accounts of the internment. Asako's gaps and elliptical narration draw attention to the repression of minority experiences of the internment to create and re-circulate versions of that marginalization. Presuming

vital connections among displacement, memory, and language, these gaps and ellipses emphasize the association of that experience with unspeakability, reiterating Jennifer Terry's notion that "the ruptures and discontinuities in history" are the very spaces upon which an "effective history" might be known (56). Because Asako is the narrator, her failure at finding language to express her internment experience demonstrates that victims like her deliberately refuse to remember and/or to verbalize the racist hostility surrounding that event, their loss of freedom and property, and their separation from family. The absence of a fully expressed articulation of the internment in the text underscores its very presence. It effectively calls attention to this abominable moment in Canadian history, to Japanese Canadians as silenced and silent victims, and to the imperative for narrative repair.

As well as employing double-voiced discourse, multiple plots, gaps, and ellipses, Sakamoto also mobilizes dreams, memories, and fantasies to "articulate the manifold nature of reality" and "harness the power of the unspoken" that Cheung notes in *Obasan* (152). Many of Asako's nightmares and imaginings in *The Electrical Field* involve her brother and her complicity in his death, one that she consistently denies. One dream, for example, similar to many others, conjures images of Eiji and Asako cresting the waves; there is no suggestion that he dies, as is confirmed later in the text: "I heard the rush of water close, almost inside me. I was riding Eiji as before, playing seahorse in the ocean at Port Dover, holding on. He swam in the black water, arms knifing in and out. Too tight, he cried, throwing back his head. I was holding him too tight, my hands a crab at his neck; we began to sink, both of us, my hair tangling dark under our mouths. *We won't die, we won't*. I whispered to myself. ... *Nii-san, nii-san*, I was calling, holding onto my big brother, my strong big brother" (53-54). Like her memories and fantasies, her dreams come in various versions, offering a plurality of possibilities rather than revolving around a definitive narrative; all, except the final one



when she comes to an acceptance of the truth, deny Eiji's death. Other versions, like her retelling of the incident to Sachi, reimagine the tragedy, with Asako able to save him:

I remember filling with strength, despite the numbing cold, the fear. ... I went down seconds after him, wriggling every muscle in my body, lashing out my arms in the murky water. *Pull him up, pull him up*, the voice went again, half my own. I remember curving my hands as Eiji had taught me, cupping the current like balls in my palms, throwing them aside until I reached him. He grabbed my hands, held them tight, his fingers gouging mine and I loved that, how our arms resisted the water that beat at them. He smiled at me, coming up to the bank, and the water bubbled around his teeth as he coughed. (273-74)

"You see," [Asako] tells Sachi, "I saved him. I saved my brother" (274). But Sachi, aware of the truth, refutes her story, suggesting, "You didn't save him. He's dead. ... You keep telling that story when you know it isn't true. Can't you say what really happened?" (275). What Asako finds difficult to articulate because of the horror, pain, shame, guilt, and anger involved frequently finds itself wordlessly released through her dreams, hallucinations, or visions, as she acknowledges. "I understood those kinds of dreams," she claims, "[t]he dreams that hid away secrets, kept them behind a closed door, closed even to yourself" (298). Such dreams can be framed differently, reconstructed imaginatively to negate the intolerable aspects of the event. Fantasy thus offers a "visualization of the world as it could be" (DuPlessis 179), and becomes a necessary coping mechanism.

Asako herself recognizes the critical link between her dreams and wordlessness, responding to the surprise of her other brother, Stum, at one of her nightmares: "As if it were beyond him to fathom that I might dream, that there were things *unspeakable* by day" (TEF 54, italics mine). Such

conflict between denial and proclamation, as Herman suggests, is central to psychological trauma, and demonstrates the struggle between negating what is too terrifying to verbalize and articulating the inadmissible to begin the healing (1). Until Asako accepts responsibility for her culpability in Eiji's and Chisako's deaths, she is denied deliverance from her guilt, and will always be haunted by these nightmares.

At the narrative's end, Asako does acknowledge her complicity in both tragedies, following Sachi's admission of her role in the murder of her friend, Tam, and his family, including his mother Chisako. Sachi confesses revealing to Tam his mother's adulterous relationship with Spears, daring him to look at the car in the parking lot. She tells Asako, "'I didn't save Tam and you didn't save your brother.' Her voice came out of the darkness, which made her words truer. 'I know what I did. I know what's true and what's a lie ... even if you don't'" (*TEF* 275, 277). Like Sachi, Asako's own journey towards redemption eventually involves confronting the past through unspoken memories of connections with others. She remembers conversations with Chisako, which made her realize her own ambivalent fascination for Yano and her associations with him, whose reference to Eiji instigates Asako's admission of guilt in Eiji's death. While most of her earlier memories in the novel are self-fulfilling fantasies, obfuscating and complicating her realities, she now accurately remembers how as a child she went out to the river the night of Eiji's death because she was jealous of a young woman's attraction for her older brother. Intending for Eiji to come after her because she felt "his attention slipping away, grasping for it any way I could" (300), and knowing that he would follow, she threw herself into the river. Eiji dove in to help her out of the river; the "water was cold that night, colder than in the day, the current dark with pummeling fists" (300), and "after, in bed, Eiji couldn't get warm. ... [J]ust to lie there took all his strength, and his breath came out of him like bits of broken string" (301). Remembering his struggle with pneumonia, the cremation of his body,

his remains contained in a cocoa tin “that we would take with us no matter where we went” (301), Asako finally acknowledges her culpability: “[I]t was me, selfish, hungering child that I was. It was me wanting the world my way, never to change, ever. It was my fault, all my fault” (301). Her guilt remains unarticulated to other characters in the novel; it is known only to herself and the reader. She does, however, embrace more joyful connections with others, such as Stum and his girlfriend Angel, whose circle of love and new possibilities have expanded to include Asako.

Sakamoto’s strategies of silence and her methods of indirection parallel what Cheung, in discussions of *Obasan*, describes as “the author’s muted rhetoric, ... her way of punctuating words with silences. ... The reader must attend to the unarticulated linkages and piece together the broken parts; meaning permeates the spaces between words” (155), which, given such a scheme, can be more powerful than speech. Moreover, filling her text symbolically with images rather than words—her characters often silent and not verbally expressive but her descriptive prose painting vivid pictures of scenes and individuals—Sakamoto effectively employs forms of imaginative telling, illustrating not the limitations of language, but the power of wordlessness.

Sakamoto’s use of silence both as a theme and as a rhetorical strategy in *The Electrical Field* speaks powerfully, calling attention to the internment of Japanese Canadians and their misrepresentation and under-representation in dominant Canadian discourses. It allows her to reframe history by resisting official narratives and reimagining the past, giving minority counterstories an opportunity to be heard. Further, the use of silence also has cross-cultural implications, accommodating, as Cheung suggests, “Japanese literary concision and nisei (second-generation) preference for indirection” (20). Such means demonstrate Sakamoto’s continuing kinship with her Japanese heritage, a personal and creative transposing of culture from a distinctly Japanese Canadian perspective and a way of reconnecting with her Japanese heritage through

writing. Transforming her political and cultural constraints into aesthetic restraint though a strategy of silence, she reinforces the inseparability of her ancestral culture and history by fusing, in her alternative poetics, both her Japanese and Canadian worlds.

## CONCLUSION

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In *The Concubine's Children*, *Tamarind Mem*, *The Electrical Field*, and *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Chong, Badami, Sakamoto, and Goto develop their own bicultural idioms, telling their stories through code-switching, a strategy indicative of their power to claim distinct voices and translate their Asian and Canadian worlds according to their experience. Their linguistic transculturation—their mixing of the dominant language in the Canadian context with the languages of their ancestral cultures—enables, as Martha J. Cutter suggests, “the transcoding [of] ethnicity, transmigrating the ethnic tongue into the English language, and renovating the language of ethnicity” (2), which is itself a form of narrative repair. These authors validate the notion, as Blanca Schorcht suggests, that language is “reflective of identity” and that culture is “inseparable” from language (9).

Because of western privileging of speech and language over silence, gendered and racialized constructions of Asian women in North America often equate their silences with docility and a lack of empowered subjectivity. These silences are often misconstrued as their acceptance, whether consciously or unconsciously, of their victimization. And yet, as this chapter also demonstrates, silence is not necessarily limiting, and does not only signal passivity, but also choice. Conscious and deliberate, it becomes a repudiation of marginalization, “a powerful means of unsaying” (Duncan 225); hence, silence can be the very opposite of submission or resignation, becoming instead the

very embodiment of a narrative act of insubordination and repair. Sakamoto's methods emphasize the silences surrounding the forced internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War and, to a certain extent, counter official narratives of the experience. They also enable her to transfigure ethnicity through her evocation and interrogation of historical records and of the stereotypically Japanese preference for discretion and indirection.

Chong's, Badami's, Sakamoto's, Goto's, and Lai's attempts to resolve the tension between the Western privileging of speech (but maintaining of "minority silence") and the Asian insistence on "the propriety of reticence" (Cheung 16) entail the use of methods such as code-switching and various strategies of silence. In telling their stories, they fuse the language of the adopted country with their ancestral tongues and incorporate the inclination for public discretion and reserve into their written texts to signify the coming together of migrant and transcultural experience.

## STORYING NATION AND THE SELF: HOME(LESSNESS) AS TROPE

*To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.*

— *Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 18.*

Genre, character, language, and narrative strategies have been explored in earlier chapters; this final chapter, in examining tropes common across the five books included in this study, argues that home, homelessness, and the mapping of identities are inseparable and are critical to an understanding of ethnicized and diasporic writing. The novels studied here, part of what Homi Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture* as “the house of fiction,” document movements of individuals across spaces, physical and otherwise, with a sense of home and homelessness always attending these movements. This house of fiction, as Bhabha notes, becomes a space recording the unsettling impact of a reorganizing technological world and global political economy, but it also presents opportunities for cohesion and community, translating to the notion of text as home, which is central to this chapter’s argument. Andrew Gurr suggests that “[t]he need for a sense of home as a base, a source of identity even more than a refuge, has grown powerfully in the last century or so. This sense of home is the goal of all voyages of self-discovery” (13). With home always imagined and reimagined in the historical and contemporary journey, homelessness and exile, especially within the context of transnational movements and the diasporic experience of not belonging, have become crucial sites in the formation of the subject.

Aptly reflecting Edward Said’s sense of the twentieth century as “the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration” (*Reflections* 174), globalization eases the crossing of borders

and promotes reconsiderations of notions of home and place by making boundaries more permeable and the circulation of information, commodities, cultural production, and individuals more rapid. Telling of these crossings, resettlements, and self-discoveries, and finding shelter in the text as home are part of narrative repair of damage as a result of the experience of being cast into what Cynthia Sugars, exploiting the double-voiced quality of the term, calls “unhomely states” (xiii). For Sugars, the “unhomeliness of the Canadian locale” incorporates various forms of experiences particularly relevant to this study and chapter, including “immigrant experiences of disjunction and alienation,” “articulations of the racist elements of the Canadian state and national imaginary,” and “various kinds of ‘in-betweenness’” (xiii).

In “The Turn to Diaspora,” Lily Cho distinguishes between transnational and diasporic subjects who cross borders, stating that while the former are secure in their movements going forward and back, with a return to the homeland possible, the latter—usually of the “underclass”—are “marked by loss,” and are “haunted, by the shadowy uncertainties of dispossession,” compelled to leave not by choice, but by necessity (19). Still, even transnational subjects as Cho describes them, whose departures from the homeland are largely motivated by the desire to enhance economic prosperity, and are, therefore, unforced, are also likely to experience what Bhabha terms the “unhomeliness of migrancy” (26). The process of un-homing is synonymous with being out of place, a condition more akin to a psychic dislocation than a physical one. In other words, being “unhomely” is different from being without a home; instead, it is the feeling of being unsettled at home, which can be experienced by both diasporic or transnational subjects and those in the host culture. Transnational subjects first experience unhomeliness because the place they now call home, a place that previously signified family, familiarity, security, and a degree of centrality and comfort, has been transformed into something unsettling in the new location. Those in the host culture find

their experience of home altered by the presence of newcomers, with the unfamiliar entering the realm of the familiar, secure, and comfortable. As Cho describes this experience in relation to diasporic migrants, a sense of dislocation “emerges from deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated, and longings which hang at the edge of possibility” (15). Such unhomeliness for Bhabha is “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity” (2). Writing in this context thus becomes repair, a gesture towards mutuality and social integration (18).

Other terms that have gained currency in this oscillation between cultures and writing are *detrterritorialization* and *reterritorialization*; both, like home and unhoming, are particularly relevant to the discussion of Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* in this chapter’s second section. For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *detrterritorialization* is displacement of the self in language and literature, a “becoming minor” (“What Is” 17). Initially formulated as the feeling that occurs when subjects are alienated from an ancestral form of production familiar to them, Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of *detrterritorialization* shifted, in *Kafka: What is a Minor Literature*, to the notion of becoming minor because one is writing in another’s language. Later theorists applied the term to subjects encouraged, pushed, or forced to migrate by the operations of capitalism. These subjects become part of a cultural and linguistic minority and, in the case of writers, create literature in the dominant language of the new place rather than in the writers’ respective mother tongues. A further expansion of the term for Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty noted *detrterritorialization* as the recognition of home as “an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences, even within oneself” (196). While leaving home can be profoundly destabilizing, as Teresa de Lauretis acknowledges (139), inhabiting it can also be difficult because homes are frequently not exempt from discriminatory



social practices. Both are, therefore, akin to an otherness, a marginalizing within hierarchies of power.

Conversely, *reterritorialization* in this study is used in terms of Caren Kaplan's notion of "being home," as outlined in "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse." It implies an unending state of becoming, fraught with the conditions of repressed histories in the place one wishes to call home. It is also (re)settlement, dwelling in a space that accepts and accommodates one's individuality, no matter how complex or challenging (365). Such a space becomes a theoretical home—not a domestic realm but a private yet open space, "a space in the imagination which allows for the inside, the outside, and the liminal elements of in-between" (367). This new home, where one eventually locates oneself according to specific histories and differences, must be "a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. What we gain is reterritorialization; we reinhabit a world of our making" (364-65). Reterritorialization is thus closely related to or achievable through narrative repair. The narrative process of relocating or renarrating the self offers the opportunity to synthesize, articulate, and celebrate new and self-determined identities that counter various and persistent marginalizing.

Helen Grice points out the prevalence of home/homelessness as a trope or theme in writings by Asian American women and acknowledges its significance. She writes that the "slippage from 'Who am I?' to 'What is my place in the world?'" is seen in many texts by Asian American women" (199). The preoccupation with home, place, and space in Asian North American women's narratives assumes many forms, in fact, among them the search for self through place recorded in both autobiography and fiction. Other forms are framed as departures, wanderings, and homecomings critical to self-representation; owning and occupying spaces; and home in other guises—as an actual remembered site, a mythologized location, or an imagined place (Grice 200-

01). Additionally, references to homes in these writings, as Grice observes, come variously as “houses of ghosts,” the “realms of maternalism,” and “domestic places” (218). These houses of ghosts are often “haunted by the spectre of familial crimes” and the horrors and secrets contained within, such as the ancestral home in Maxine Hong-Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, which was witness to the villagers’ raid, the birth of No Name Woman’s child in a pigsty, and her subsequent drowning of both herself and her baby in a well by the house (218). Homes can also be maternal sites because, as demonstrated in Julie Shigekune’s 1995 novel *A Bridge Between Us*, “a return home is the return to the mother, as it is her space” (Grice 219). Frequently, as is also the case with Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and Anita Rau Badami’s *Tamarind Mem*, the house is a domestic, decidedly predominantly female site with mothers and daughters engaged in intergenerational conflicts, as chapter 1 argued. And texts can also be home spaces, especially with autobiography as a “favoured way to create a textual home for the self,” as can be similarly inferred from chapter 1 (Grice 203).

Two additional significant paradigms critical to discussions of homes in women’s writing are “women’s need for a room of [their] own (Virginia Woolf)” and “women in the house of fiction (Lorna Sage’s use of a Jamesian image)” (Grice 222). These constructs, together with cultural, social, and political concerns, bring together spatial and feminist politics, offering the idea of what Grice terms the “woman’s room in the house of fiction” (222). Visibly ethnicized female authors, especially African North American, Asian North American, and Indigenous women, are more recently gaining entry inside the walls of this house of fiction, staking ownership of that room, even renovating and restructuring it.

This coming together of feminist and spatial politics emphasizes the range of preoccupations of women writers, especially Asian North American women, not the least of which are the concerns

with (home)lessness and the construction of selfhood. Autobiographical texts from the 1990s that demonstrate these concerns are Japanese American Lydia Minatoya's *Talking to High Monks in the Snow* (1992) and Japanese American Kyoko Mori's *The Dream Water* (1995), which chart odysseys back to ancestral homelands in a search for cultural identity. For writers and characters alike, including Maxine Hong Kingston and the daughters in Amy Tan's novels, Asia remains an imagined homeplace. And although many may also have psychologically renounced their respective countries of origin as the homeland, their attempts to make North America home are often held back by what Grice identifies as conditions of liminality, repudiations of citizenship, and other prohibitive practices (201).

Several Asian Canadian women authors similarly write of inhospitable treatment in their adopted homeland. In *Obasan* and *The Electrical Field*, Joy Kogawa and Kerri Sakamoto engage with the internment and relocation experiences of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War; in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and *The Concubine's Children*, SKY Lee and Denise Chong explore Canada's racist policies and practices towards Chinese immigrants, presenting the new country as unwelcoming to those racially othered by the discursive construction of the nation and/or by the nation's immigration and/or citizenship laws. These Asian Canadian women's narratives show that Asian female immigrants, crossing borders to make Canada home, strain against classism, racism, sexism, and sometimes heterosexism; their texts identify scripts that helped construct damaging identities for these women, which is the first step in counterstorying. However, the border-crossing experience also offers opportunities for new freedoms and the possibilities of growth, including narratives that allow for a more empowered sense of self, a counterstorying that in its next phase alters these women's understanding of their identities so that they now view themselves as Nelson's competent agents.

Asian North American women, as some of these writings also demonstrate, are not truly at home in their ancestral homelands; patriarchy and inadequate legal protections for the rights of women and non-heterosexuals can have damaging consequences. Because Canada has legalized same-sex marriages and legally prohibited discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexual orientation, some women seek refuge in Canada from their homelands, which may have far more oppressive regimes in terms of their treatment of gay and lesbian individuals. Such conditions and circumstances make Canada a terrain simultaneously debilitating and rich in potential, a contested site of (un)belonging. And because violations and violences in diverse forms, as noted earlier, often attend homes, whether in Canada or elsewhere, Asian female immigrants and others negatively gendered and racialized are frequently never quite at home. Their state of homelessness compels them to seek new spaces—geographic, physical, cultural, even linguistic—characterized by coherence, safety, freedom, and affirmation of voice for all. In many instances, therefore, home becomes the pages of a book, a location that David Theo Goldberg defines as “a place of peace, of shelter from terror, doubt and division, a geography of self-determination and sanctity” (199).

As the first part of this chapter demonstrates, writings by Badami, Chong, Lai, Sakamoto, and Goto interrogate the notion of Canada as home, the *Canadas* in their respective imaginaries as liberating and/or limiting, as spaces of constraint and/or possibility. More than the country’s geography or climate, social encounters define home/homelessness in their narratives, with racialization, gender, and sexuality critical to the ways each conceives and writes about Canada, especially as she holds the nation’s rhetoric of multiculturalism up against lived realities. Of the five, Badami writes about Canada the least, her novel imbued with vivid details of India and her ancestral culture, rather than of the Canada where Kamini, one of her central characters, pursues graduate studies. Chong’s, Lai’s, Sakamoto’s, and Goto’s narratives, the focus of the following

section, examine institutionalized oppressions such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the internment of Japanese Canadians, other less formal aspects of racialized and gendered discrimination, and the violence spurred by misogyny and homophobia. Their rewritings of Canadian history and society from very distinct Asian and Asian Canadian perspectives draw on alternative discourses and challenge Canada's monolithic Eurocentredness and privileging of the masculine, as well as national proclamations of tolerance and diversity.

While the first section of this chapter examines what Canada is to the five authors and how they intervene in its construction, the second part considers home not necessarily only as a geographical location or a physical territory but also as a reterritorializing or reterritorialized space. Various kinds of resettling happen in Badami's, Goto's, Lai's, and Sakamoto's texts, but the reterritorialization in Chong's writing, because of its autobiographical nature, is especially powerful. In Chong's narrative, Canada is a complex and conflicted site, especially for May-ying and Hing, but also for Chan Sam and many other Chinese labourers who journeyed from distant China, seeking the promise of the Gold Mountain. Canada's exclusionary policies and racist practices towards Asians, especially Chinese immigrants, is deterritorializing in Kaplan's sense of the term. Noting her grandparents' and parents' circumstances and their struggle with opposing cultures and vexed positions of periphery and centre, Chong calls forth the power of language to tell her and her family's story, a process of reterritorializing and narrative repair not only for her, but also for her mother, who journeys with her to China. Supposedly burdened with the imperative of silence, Chong speaks in terms similar to what Sidonie Smith calls being "of a group, to speak for a group" (193), placing not only her grandmother's memory, her mother's story, and her own search for origins and identity in her book, but also more broadly those of Chinese Canadian women. *The Concubine's Children* itself becomes a theoretical home for Chong, and writing it enables her to

rescue so-called minority stories from the oblivion of unchosen silence. Whether or not the home is geographic or textual, the notion of home, as this chapter demonstrates, is critical to identity construction, and the search for it crucial in the journey of self-discovery represented in the narratives of Asian Canadian women writers.

## CONSTRAINT OR/AND POSSIBILITY AND THE (RE)WRITING OF HOME

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*Canada has already been invented in the imaginary of its would-be residents in numerous ways, inventions which would be discarded, often in pain and confusion, as more Canadas are invented.*

— Arnold Harrichand Itwaru, *The Invention of Canada: Literary Text and the Immigrant Imaginary*, 14

As Arnold Harrichand Itwaru suggests, Canada is framed by several centuries of literature within and beyond its borders, providing layers of multifarious voices writing and rewriting a nation. The more traditional of these texts produce what Gabriele Helms calls “gendered, racialized, and classed versions of [the nation] that work to privilege dominant groups, especially those constituted as white, middle-class, male and heterosexual” (4). Chong, an economist and former senior economic adviser to past prime minister Pierre Trudeau but also a third-generation Chinese Canadian and author of *The Concubine’s Children*, states that one of the nation’s greatest strengths is Canadian citizenship’s recognition of “differences” and praise of diversity: “It is what we Canadians *choose* to have in common with each other” (“Work” 33, original italics). In her article on Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, Michèle Gunderson suggests that Chong explores two aspects of these dominant multicultural discourses: the idea that “Canada is, and always has been a land of equal opportunity and promise for all immigrants,” and that “members of any particular

racial ethnic group share certain characteristics that are unchanging over time and that contribute positively to Canada's identity as a multicultural nation" (107). Such multicultural rhetoric, synonymous with the "mosaic" concept made popular by John Porter's 1965 *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, implies, according to Itwaru, the retention of ethnic identities and yet full membership in the nation (15-16). However, voices speaking the country's history express a "tension between the lived world and the political ego-ideal dimensions contained in national self-statements"; clearly, there are perceived differences between the state's articulation of multiculturalism and the experience of it by those governed by the state. Such disparities therefore challenge the "state's notion of reality, and reality as an invention in itself," and help inform, as well as being informed by, these contexts (10).

Helms writes that many contemporary Canadian novels resist the state's multicultural discourse and dispute notions of Canada as a "benign and tolerant country, a 'peaceable kingdom,' a country without a history of oppression, violence, or discrimination" (3). Her own project, which grounds the premise for this chapter's section, demonstrates that narratives by Jeannette Armstrong, Joy Kogawa, Daphne Marlatt, SKY Lee, Aritha van Herk, Thomas King, and Margaret Sweatman resist "a homogenous and universalist and benign understanding of Canada" (146) and "give voice to those previously silenced and resituate those cast as outsiders, thereby exposing the myth of an innocent nation and challenging its hegemonic centre" (3). Shaped by the many changing parameters of citizenship, language, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class, these texts offer fascinating versions of Canada from the perspective of minoritized groups who are frequently elided in dominant discourses, their presence negated or ignored in a country they now identify as home.

Comparable to the novels Helms describes are those written by the Asian Canadian women in this study who reimagine Canada as home, interrogating their often ambivalent attitudes towards their new country of residence or citizenship. The Canada of their narratives is simultaneously a site of brutality and promise, of constraint and possibility. Most of *Tamarind Mem*'s imaginings of Canada are of diversity and opportunity, but the passages are brief and superficial. Chong's *The Concubine's Children*, Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*, Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, and Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* embrace Canada's multicultural rhetoric as an ideal, but also challenge it, showing how immigrant and second- and third-generation characters are negatively racialized and ethnicized, but also contemplating, and at times celebrating, the nation's many freedoms and occasions for growth. And if, to the characters created by these writers, Canada has become their adopted country, it is not always welcoming. Texts by Chong, Lai, Sakamoto, and Goto imagine a global, economic, social, and cultural power enticing especially to those outside its national borders, but at the same time an exclusionary, sometimes violent, society, inhospitable to those within who are deemed racially and culturally inferior.

Canada's history of institutionalized racism is revisited in Chong's *The Concubine's Children* and Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*. The former mentions the so-called head tax of 1885 and other exclusionary legislation against Chinese migrants to Canada, and the latter makes references to the incarceration of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Chong describes how, with prevailing anti-Chinese sentiments in the 1870s and 1880s, Chinese entry into Canada was drastically reduced; bans were made against hiring Chinese workers; and special taxes were levied on Chinese residents for schools and policing, employment, laundry, shoes, and cigars. They were similarly barred from becoming naturalized citizens, from owning land, and from being employed on public works, although disgust at Chinese presence in Canada did not prevent their



exploitation as cheap labour (CC 13-14). Chong also calls attention to the revised Chinese Immigration Act, which made re-entry to Canada difficult for the period it was in force, 1923-1947; a trip back to China, like Chan Sam's to visit his wife, was not only expensive but impractical. Further, Chong's book explores the multiple oppressions of racism and classism and the alienating loneliness of exile endured by Chinese men who moved to Canada. Similarly, Sakamoto's narrative explores the internment of persons of Japanese descent during the Second World War, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, with her characters themselves victims of the atrocity and still reeling in the present from the repercussions of the experience. The uprooting, upheaval, collective and personal loss, incarceration, relocation, and eventual deportation of Canadian citizens of Japanese descent all demonstrate how the state imposed a national identity based on a fictive ethnicity both of the Japanese and of the Canadian, and how this crisis of internment significantly relates to other hostilities that continue to have an impact on survivors thirty years later.

Beyond calling attention to these discriminatory legislations, *The Concubine's Children* and *The Electrical Field*, through their accounts of racism and sexism and of the dominant groups' homogenizing and assimilationist assumptions, expose as myth Canada's idea of itself as a benevolent society, with these forms of intolerance becoming insurmountable hindrances, resulting in marginal economic and social positions for the Asian Canadians in the narratives. In *The Concubine's Children*, for example, the Chinese in Canada are constructed by the dominant culture as commodities to be exchanged, enslaved, and indentured. Even as cheap workers they "sank to the bottom of the labor pool; eight of ten of the thirteen thousand residents of Vancouver's Chinatown [were] unemployed" (Chong 55). Owners of mills, mines, and canneries that managed to stay in operation during the Depression of the 1930s acted as the politicians preached—"put white men, Canadian fathers living here with their families ahead of Chinese men, bachelors who

sent money out of the country to families abroad” (55-56). With previous work connections to various mills, mines, and canneries gone, with no collateral in Canada to take out loans, and with limited English and work skills, Chinese men like Chan Sam confronted the economic and political subordination and exploitation of negatively racialized families that nullified the Gold Mountain stories of adventure, wealth, and freedom that had initially captured their imagination. Chong also writes about the prevalent “We don’t hire Chinese” (178) policies and the absence of university graduates in Chinatown and “professionals among the generation of Hing’s immigrant parents” (176). As the narrator observes of Hing’s prospects, “enfranchisement—a requirement for practicing a profession—would come only after exclusion was lifted,” and even with enfranchisement,

other barriers would have to fall before there were more Chinese engineers, lawyers, accountants, pharmacists, doctors or dentists. Most parents in Chinatown, even if they could afford it, saw little practicality in paying for a university degree only to have their children end up no further ahead than they were—waiting tables, driving taxis, working in laundries, mills or wholesale houses—in other words, either working in Chinatown or where whites allowed Chinese to work. (176-77)

Bigotry from her Canadian peers and supervisors similarly compels Hing to abandon nursing as a profession. Chong’s references to her mother’s experience emphasize how prejudice creates intolerable conditions for Chinese women, inhibiting them from imagining and enacting liberating possibilities for their lives.

In *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *When Fox Is a Thousand*, Canada is a space of painful difference where “Others,” according to Robyn Morris commenting in relation to Lai’s narrative,

“have no ‘choice’ in their naming” (“Making Eyes” 82). Their identities, often predicated only on race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, are interpreted through Western lenses. Naoe’s self-imposed silence, for example, feeds the one imposed externally by a EuroCanadian culture that renders her invisible and effectively voiceless. As noted in Chapter 2, her initial loss of voice bespeaks an impotence in the face of damaging prejudice towards Asians, especially the assumption that because she does not speak English, she must be illiterate. This novel’s social construction of otherness also appears in several forms: scripting that because Murasaki looks Japanese, even if she was born in Canada, she knows about “Oriental sex,” as her high school boyfriend has imagined (122) or, as a racialized Safeway encounter demonstrates, that she must know about Asian vegetables. This “vegetable politics,” as Roy Miki argues, is synonymous with “race politics,” or “ethnic politics,” or “cultural politics,” which “fold[s] back into a national and colonial history in which the Asian body has been formulated.” Such racializing marks the Asian as “not white,” a “formative lack” against the vaunted white body (*In Flux* 97). For Marc Colavincenzo, these passages imply a “vaguely conceived Orientalism” that blurs Murasaki’s exact heritage and excludes her from the Canadian mosaic (224). Murasaki’s identity is thus framed not by her own personal history—she was born in Canada, has a North American cultural upbringing, and considers herself Canadian—but by what Morris calls an “assumption of power that allows whiteness the majesty of ... looking without seeing” (82). This damage to positionings of subjects such as Murasaki requires narrative repair.

Kay’s pot roasts, her refusal to speak Japanese, and her willingness to have Murasaki’s hair dyed blond testify to the power and temptation of Canadianness and assimilation, especially as a means of survival. Explaining why she raised Murasaki to be stereotypically Canadian, Kay claims, “When I decided to immigrate, I decided to be at home in my new country. You can’t be everything

at once. It is too confusing for a child to juggle two cultures. Two sets of ideals. If you want a child to have a normal and accepted lifestyle, you have to live like everyone else” (*CM* 189). As Murasaki herself acknowledges, “[t]he place where we lived didn’t foster cultural difference. It only had room for cultural integration. If you didn’t abide by the unwritten rules of conduct, you were alienated as an other, subject to suspicion and mistrust” (189). The minoritization Murasaki describes undermines Canada’s multicultural policy which, according to Eva Mackey, presents an image of a supposedly tolerant national history constructed by the state, that, in the name of pluralism and the acceptance of ethnic diversity, reimagines the often racist history of Canada (2).<sup>44</sup> With *Chorus of Mushrooms* set after the enactment of the multicultural policy, this marginalizing belies the notion that the policy has been successfully enacted and calls into question the basis of that policy on a broad consensus of tolerance toward culturally and ethnically different people among the majority of “people-who-comprise-the-nation” (Gandhi, *Postcolonialism: A Critical Introduction* 119).

Lai’s Artemis in *When Fox Is a Thousand* is also trapped by what Morris calls the “dispossessing white gaze” (“Making Eyes” 83). She desires assimilation into whiteness by denying her cultural (Chinese) past, but the white-washed walls and rose-pink carpets of her childhood do not exempt her from otherness even in her own home. With adopted Canadian parents specializing in Asian Studies and Ancient cultures, she is the personification of their occupations, becoming the objectified exotic daughter who embodies their compulsion to study the orient and fetishize the past (*WFT* 39). Her friend Diane’s question, “Do you ever catch them looking at you funny?” (39), emphasizes the framing of her body based on difference and the stereotyping of women of Asian descent living in Canada, with this racialized and sexualized containment and silencing reaching insidious and harrowing proportions in the novel’s “The Judge of the Underworld” section. When

Artemis identifies her friend Mercy Lee's body in the morgue after her brutal murder, Fox describes five other women of Asian ancestry standing before the judge of the High Court of the Underworld; the judge would determine among them who finds rest within his jurisdiction (218). The first was beaten to death with baseball bats by "four young white men with shaven heads," who said something about "Orientals taking over the city and putting white people out of work" (216). The second, with "hair like a boy," was killed by "two men with jeans and crewcuts" who called her 'Faggot' and 'Bum-fucker' even after her explanations to them that she was not one, but was simply waiting for her father outside the public washroom. The third, from Hong Kong, was beaten to death with a crowbar by men who had initially blackmailed her into giving them hundreds of dollars, and killed her when she could not provide the thousands they later demanded. The fourth, from Taiwan, was murdered, like the third, for her money, robbed while walking in the park at night. The fifth, having engaged in a sexual relationship with a woman, was killed with a hockey stick by her brother in what was supposedly a crime of honour (215-18). All victims are Chinese Canadian women; some are assumed or implied to be lesbian; all are senselessly killed on the basis of negative racialization, gender, and/or sexuality, their killers remaining unpunished. Lai thus reinforces not only the alien otherness that informs her women characters' racial and gendered identities, but also challenges assumptions of Canada as a socio-political environment of acceptance, charity, and security. Hers is a violent Canada; she gives explicit bodily shape not only to the invisibility of and violations against Asian Canadian women, but also of and against lesbians in a heterosexist society.

These writers' visions of Canada, however, do not only articulate unbelonging, denials of citizenship, absence, loss, traumatized memories, and various forms of oppression; some also articulate promise, possibility, and even narrative repair. *Tamarind Mem* in particular endorses

Canada's dominant rhetoric of opportunity and diversity, but that may be because Badami's primary focus is India; Canada is barely mentioned in her narrative.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Chong's, Sakamoto's, Goto's and Lai's versions of Canada, Badami's Canada is a space of utopian socio-economic possibility, albeit cold and isolating, and contrasts markedly with her India, a warm, vibrant community rich in family and culture, but limiting to women caught in its centuries-old patriarchy. Pursuing a doctorate in chemical engineering, Kamini calls her mother regularly from Calgary, "yearn[ing] to get away from this freezing cold city where even the traffic sounds were muffled by snow" (2, original italics). In winter's freezing drabness, she longs for Saroja's gulmohur tree with its flaming red flowers: "Here, in Calgary, I had no gulmohur outside my window, but a lilac bloomed in summer and filled my home with its delicate fragrance. Sometimes I wished that I could trap the beauty of those flowers to last me through the winter, as well" (40). There are seasonal differences between Kamini's ancestral and adopted countries but also ready equivalencies for the countries' flora and acceptance of minorities. Even with the social cold shoulder that Canada gives to negatively racialized people and the cold of its winter climate, that natural cold is not unrelenting; there is social "warmth" in some aspects of Canadian society, with that warmth not necessarily seasonal in character. Additionally, in Canada, Kamini enjoys privileges and opportunities not likely available to women like her in India even if her cold, cramped basement apartment is hardly the paradise that her remembered Indian environment and cuisine are with their sensory textures and flavors. With her gender, race, and marital status not barriers to gaining entry to graduate school in a field previously only accessible to men, Canada affords Kamini what her mother was denied in India: a greater freedom to live up to her potential and make her own choices.

While exposing the bigotry and exclusion in Canada that threaten a sense of integrated identity, Chong, Sakamoto, Lai, and Goto nonetheless affirm community, resilience, survival, and

change, with repair in this context evident in their (re)writing the adopted country as home. In *The Concubine's Children*, Hing is unable to pursue a nursing degree but her daughter Denise, a third-generation Chinese Canadian, becomes a writer after serving as a high-level government economist. Fox's decision to stop haunting Artemis in *When Fox Is a Thousand* holds some promise for the latter's future, as does Asako's acceptance in *The Electrical Field* of her culpability in Eiji's and Chisako's deaths. And in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Murasaki, eschewing the AngloCanadian name Muriel given by her mother, finds in Naoe's narratives the emancipatory legacies of the past, and more importantly, of self, family, and culture. While she initially struggles with reconciling her conflicting cultural inheritances growing up on her father's mushroom farm in Alberta, Murasaki eventually embraces her self-identify as Japanese and Canadian. Claiming to have "finally arrived and now I can go" (CC 198), she literally and figuratively takes to new journeys, confident in her better understanding of a bicultural self.

More than Murasaki's transformation, Naoe's figurative rather than realistic translation into a bullrider, a figure of empowered Canadian identity, is especially surprising. Eva Darias-Beautell suggests that Naoe's "success as a bullrider may signify her final appropriation of the Western Canadian tradition, her intimate fusion with the bull symbolizing the ultimate identification of woman and land, of culture and territory" ("Hiromi Goto's" 49). She is no longer exotic or foreign, but a part of the Canadian landscape like the popular Stampede. Her imagined first-person account of that moment emphasizes her "reaching for that place" where she "float[s] like a ballerina, like a Minoan gymnast," she and the bull moving as one towards unparalleled heights: "The jolt and lurch in my arm and spine, ahhh, this old woman can hold on still. ... We spin tighter, tighter, an infinite source of wind and dust. ... The wind we churn flings cowboy hats to Winnipeg, Victoria,

Montreal, as far as Charlottetown. Weather patterns will be affected for the next five years and no one will know the reason. It makes me laugh and I'm still riding, the bull is still beneath me" (218).

This passage exemplifies an insubordinate narrative, since Naoe's imagined ride apparently has an impact on the breadth of Canada as it reaches from the present into the future. She and the bull together present a compelling image, especially with Naoe finding unity and power in Canadian space not in relation to other Canadians, but in a situation in which the captive nature represented by the bull is foremost. The spectacle of white masculine power that the Calgary Stampede offers evokes associations of what that power managed to subdue, domesticate, even "civilize," including wild nature, Indigenous people, and other minorities and women. It is ironic that Naoe's insertion into a powerful scene within the national imaginary comes at the expense of the bull's subjection, despite the claim that she is one with it and acknowledges its power. Still, in a celebration of a particularly Western Canadian heritage, centrally male and white in its articulation, Naoe's skilled participation in this pageant is significant.

Goto's Canada, like Chong's, Lai's, and Sakamoto's, may be marked by the spectre of the other, and the many forms of exclusion that such a marginalization involves. However, her reimagining of an eighty-five-year-old Japanese Canadian woman as a bullrider implies that despite mainstream marginalizing of such women, it is possible for that other to "ride into a storm," "[t]he roaring howl of dust devil turned tornado" (218). In this powerful counterstorying, Naoe is revealed as a respectable and formidable agent, rising beyond constrained circumstances to make possible what she always imagines herself to be.

The (re)presentations of Canada by these women writers do not offer essentialized or polarized views of the nation, but layered and nuanced conceptions that, in Helms's terms, allow them to "challenge the hegemonic constructions that have gained currency and to imagine



alternatives” (6). The domination of animal by human noted earlier is part of Canadian hegemony; that construction and many others, written from minoritized locations, disrupt a monolithic understanding of Canada as a tolerant nation. They also present “the psychic, social, and historical damage of being named and categorized as a racial other” (Ty, *Politics* 185), which is almost a precondition for existence within the nation’s boundaries. These writers’ revisionings of Canada show signs of connecting with some of the suppressed histories that Canadian ethnicity, the Canada of what Daniel Coleman calls “White civility,” obscures. They align to an extent with Coleman’s contention that Whiteness, especially as it is based on a British model of civility, has become the standard for Canadian cultural identity (5), marginalizing those not fitting this model of White normativity. However, these writers also depict Canada as home where opportunities for esteem, renewal, redemption, and success may be possible in their and their characters’ geographic relocations and now bicultural existences.

## OF DISCOURSE AND (DE)RETERRITORIALIZATIONS

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*[W]ords are our doors towards all other worlds.... At a certain moment for the person who has lost everything, whether that means, moreover, a being or a country, language is what becomes the country. One enters the country of words... [T]here everything is exile and nothing is exile.*

—Hélène Cixous, “From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History,” 1-18.

As noted in the previous section, for those seeking to make Canada their new home, as Itwaru notes, the “search for meaning within the country named Canada is also the search for Canada as a domain of experience integral to the development of a sense of self.” This development is especially relevant “within the interplay of biography and current pain and confusion, as more Canadas are invented” (13-14). The rewriting of Canada simultaneously entails the exile’s,

immigrant's, and refugee's own reinvention, ensuring a "becoming," a metamorphosis either conscious or unconscious, and an emerging awareness of the possibilities available for redefinition in a new culture (13). Whether the home then is geographic and physical, or imagined and textual, its interconnectedness with self-representation is critical.

For many writers, their narratives become cogent personal, social, cultural, historical, and political documents that make possible, through discourse, a validation of themselves as subjects and a legitimation and repair of their stories. Habitation in what Hélène Cixous calls this "country of words" enables definition, recuperation, and cohesion because the coming to language itself arrives from a place of loss and, therefore, of need and desire. If these narratives are read, the writers' voices are heard and they are given dispensation to resist, challenge, even fight back, as well as to fuse locations, histories, and affiliations.

Chong's *The Concubine's Children*, which retraces the complex terrain traveled by Chinese women migrants and their Canadian-born children, presents the text as home, and as both deterritorializing and reterritorializing. The other authors in this study exemplify in various ways deterritorialization and reterritorialization, but the trend is more cogent in Chong, because her work is creative non-fiction. As noted in chapter 1, Chong's narrative is familial and cultural life-writing, reworking the autobiographical genre and incorporating a range of autobiographical models and rhetorical strategies. Chong's book can be framed, as noted in that chapter, within Kaplan's understanding of cultural autobiography or what Ellen Quigley identifies as Chinese annalistic biographies.

As cultural autobiography, Chong's narrative is premised on multiple deterritorializations, a "becoming minor" on account of political, economic, and psychic valences that include the struggles of Chong's grandparents and mother against racism, classism, and sexism in Canada.

These struggles are evident in the depiction of Chan Sam's and May-ying's marginalized experiences; the family's years of poverty and separation from other family members; and Chong's own ignorance of her family history and cultural past. These instances of unhoming extend to Hing's contentious relationship with her mother, May-ying, and her childhood trauma. The absence of family and home is also critical for Hing inasmuch as, according to Gunderson, a familial economy, like psychic, community, and societal economies, shapes identities (109). Frequently left behind among people Hing hardly knew (*CC* 155, 42), separated from her two sisters in China, and forbidden to acknowledge her father, Hing negotiates childhood by herself (230). Marriage takes Hing away from her mother, but even as she creates her own home and family, such movement toward nurturance is never final; her past continues to intrude on her present, compromising semblances of the peace she attempts to make for herself. She remains damaged, with the trauma of her childhood and the blatant racial prejudice she experiences as an adult inhibiting her from imagining better alternatives for herself.

Her grandparents' and mother's deterritorializations notwithstanding, Chong's own displacement stems from not having access to aspects of her family's history, especially the layers of ambivalence and silence shrouding her grandparents' racialized struggles and the legacy she has misunderstood and neglected. Her mother deliberately "tried to hold shut the door on the past" (ix), and Chong herself "was not enough of a living link" (x): "I had known my grandfather only as a young child, and my memories of him were fragmentary. I had known my grandmother longer, but by the time I was either interested in the past or had the necessary courage to ask her about it, she was long gone" (x). Each remnant of the past—a photograph of two young children, formal portraits of Chan Sam and May-ying—"lent itself to a legacy of oral history," for each of the pictures was "intimate enough to be a powerfully suggestive voice from the past, but also distant

enough to stir curiosity. These were the only artifacts of their generation; anything else of value had gone the way of the pawnshop” (x, ix), she claims. Similarly, the disparity between her and her grandparents’ experiences in Canada assumed crucial significance for Chong, who acknowledges that “I didn’t realize the extent of it, until I did my history, that my grandparents lived in Canada at a time when they could not participate in White society” (Chong “Interview” 1). As she further explains, “They were excluded from it: they could not take out citizenship, they couldn’t own land, they couldn’t vote. And when I think back, that’s part of their legacy ... And within a few decades, here I was, working for the Prime Minister” (1). Unlike her grandparents, Chong is wholly assimilated into and successful in Canadian society.

Reclaiming her family’s past and the larger history of Chinese settlement in Canada was necessary for Chong to effect repair of her Chinese Canadian identity. To evolve new and empowering formations of self, family, community, and culture, she had to move beyond others’ silence and her own ignorance to a place of remembering and enunciation. As Thomas Couser suggests, “reviving ... memories is necessary ... precisely because [frequently] the only history is memory. Not to remember is to accede to the erasure or distortion of collective experience; to repress memory is to reenact and perpetuate the oppression” (107). Reviving, naming, and articulating memory, whether personal, familial, communal, or cultural is, therefore, in *The Concubine’s Children*, a movement from margin to centre.

In the wake of the burning of Nanaimo’s Chinatown in 1960 and the disintegration of Vancouver’s Chinatown as the newest wave of Asian immigrants bypassed it in favor of rooting in flourishing suburbs, Chong is compelled to reconstruct her personal and collective identity, and this reconstruction offers members of her family and herself opportunities for reterritorialization. Her recovery of her grandparents’ conflicted experiences vindicates them and honours their memories:

“My feeling was that I had found some nobility of purpose to the hard lives that Chan Sam and May-ying led” (CC 291). Her narrative reconstructs the past with as much fidelity and yet as much imagination as possible, offering Chong the opportunity to recast her grandmother not as the villain the family imagines her to be, but as much a victim as Chan Sam was. Both were oppressed by patriarchal social structures in China and by EuroCanadian capitalism and the overlapping networks of power in their adopted country. In her narrative, Chong reveals May-ying’s flaws, but she also nuances some of her actions and attributes; for example, what May-ying’s family considered weaknesses—her brashness and egocentrism—translate instead, in Chong’s writing to assertiveness, bravery, and even generosity of spirit. Chong’s counterstorying thus endorses May-ying as a respectable agent given the opportunity to be seen as enjoying “valuable roles, relationships, and goods” (Nelson 7); this new appreciation for May-ying in turn legitimizes Chong’s project. Visiting Chan Sam’s and May-ying’s graves, Chong states that she “has not brought anything to leave behind, but that is not why I’ve come. If they could hear from the grave, I would tell my grandfather and my grandmother that I have seen, for their dead eyes, the fruits of their labors. I would tell them they can now close their eyes in sleep” (CC 292). The grandparents’ names and memories have been redeemed by their granddaughter’s narrative. Finding herself in possession of Chan Sam’s portrait and May-ying’s photograph, Chong puts the pictures into the family album and sends framed copies of each to her Aunt Ping in China. The gesture is more than symbolic; it is reterritorializing and reparative, because of its effects of settling, of synthesis and closure, of a wholeness that intimates well-being.

Also reterritorializing for Chong is helping make possible for Hing a radical shift in perspectives, and building renewed connections among three generations of women in the family. While Chong’s and her mother’s visit to China in 1987 may have physically united the family

“cleaved in two by misfortune and chance” (292), writing *The Concubine’s Children* offered the opportunity to explore the past and the turbulent relationships between mothers and daughters. The process enabled memories to be examined, secrets to be unlocked, and trauma to be acknowledged. The trip to China and the textual visits into the past return Hing to the root of her pain and vulnerability, but with her past “illuminated” and “the burden of her shame lifted” (286), her bitterness transforms to understanding and gratitude as she finally sees her mother as a respectable agent. As Chong writes, “For Mother, who had lived her childhood in a shadow of sacrifice for the Chinese side of the family, her parents’ act of immigration to the new world and her mother’s determination in pregnancy to chance the journey by sea had been her liberation, the best gift of all” (286). Chong’s negotiations of the past and among different generations of women in her family allow them to share meaningfully in each other’s experiences, reclaiming alliances as mothers and daughters, and as women. Further, Chong actualizes a family reunion for Hing because her book, directed to an extent at easing her mother’s feelings of rejection, succeeds in reconnecting her with her surviving family in China. For Zackodnik, such coming together “represents both a ‘completion of blanks in the family tree’ and a closing down of possibility” (67, quoting Chong ) that provides the necessary closure to move forward. Chong thus creates textual space that achieves healing and reconciliation.

When Chong engages with her family’s story, it is not only May-ying (her grandmother) and Hing (her mother) who gain from the telling; she also reterritorializes herself within the pages of her text with her recovery of family history and ancestral culture from the layers of silence shrouding her mother’s stories. Her visit to her grandfather’s village in China in the process of writing the book reaffirmed cultural and ancestral ties; moreover, telling her family’s story as a

third-generation Chinese Canadian enabled her to re-value her legacy and find renewed meaning in and appreciation for family in China and Canada.

If Chong's book gave back to her and her mother their family, their history, and their long-denied allegiances of home, *The Concubine's Children* also offers Chong opportunities for self-reflection and discovery, further delineating it as reterritorializing space. With her personal history contingent upon family history and cultural heritage, she learns that her story is located within the collective story of her family and community and is inextricably linked to her grandmother's and mother's stories. As she acknowledges, "The lost history that Mother and I recovered gave the past new meaning, perhaps enough to be a compass to provide some bearings when her grandchildren chart their own course" (292). *The Concubine's Children*, therefore, enables Chong to write parts of herself. As she said in an interview, "When you write about the past, it survives as an act of writing.... The life you lead begins before your time and I believe it lingers long after your time. [Writing this book] let me go forward and make up my life as I go" (qtd. in Kumagai). Sifting through her family's history and its secrets and silences for explanation and understanding, she finds opportunities for self-recovery, self-knowledge, self-formation, and self-expression.

Writing *The Concubine's Children* allowed Chong to develop her unique voice, allowing her to speak and write in a new language of self-in-community, or more accurately self-in-communities, whether the communities in which Chong's self is embedded and those she speaks for are Chinese, Chinese Canadian, or Asian Canadian. The political, cultural, social, and historical inscriptions in her text are reterritorializing, allowing her to claim a feminist and cultural power and enabling her to rescue Chinese Canadian women from invisibility and stereotypical representations by revising and repairing counterfeit discourses about them. Chong's honouring of her female ancestors and her compassionate engagement with their experiences of legislated racism and

difficult acculturation in Canada give them status as speaking subjects and respectable agents, validating their struggles. She parallels Maxine Hong-Kingston, Amy Tan, and Fae Myenne Ng in what Ho says is their (re)presentations of “Chinese-American families in their pain and complicities, and, most importantly, in their inventive and eclectic strategies for survival” (238). She demonstrates Ho’s assertion that “recovering each other’s stories is a form of personal and communal struggle and agency” (238). While racism and exclusion denied Chinese Canadians a positive collective identity, and the arbitrary violences against Asian women in Canada left them voiceless, “virtually unrecorded in Canadian discourse” and “an empty blank in existing academic disciplines” (Chao 219), *The Concubine’s Children* allows Chong to break through what Lien Chao terms the “double silence” of Chinese Canadian women as “racial minority women” (221). By articulating a decidedly female, distinctly Chinese Canadian experience, and by reclaiming otherwise neglected stories, Chong, in an exemplary instance of narrative repair, breaks through the disciplining injunctions toward silence to discover a new cultural identity and her own voice.

For Chong, “[s]uch a book is never finished, but there comes a time when the story is ready to be told” (CC vii). Telling the stories of three generations of Chinese Canadian women who come to terms with themselves, each other, and both their original and adopted homes, she celebrates how memory and articulating that memory bring integration, cohesion, and change. *The Concubine’s Children*, more than “beautiful, haunting, and wise,” as a review in *The New York Times* described the book, is committed, responsible, and freeing, its liberatory politics aligned with its project of narrative repair. As well, for Chong, reterritorializing within those pages becomes an intermediate step to making Canada as physical place and as conglomeration of social spaces more of a home for her and other Chinese Canadians.



## CONCLUSION

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For Badami, Chong, Goto, Lai, and Sakamoto, place and displacement—either in and during odysseys to and resettlement in long-imagined places like Canada or back to now partly mythologized ancestral homelands in Asia—are critical to conceptions of home. Race, gender, and sexuality also figure significantly in how these writers conceive of and construct Canada. In the two-step process of counterstorying, their narratives simultaneously challenge and celebrate dominant constructions, as they shift back and forth between minority and majority locations available to them as women, as Asian Canadians, and as writers.

Having secured publication of their works and experiencing critical recognition and increasing adoption of their books into school curricula, the authors under study call attention to the possibilities available even for those once considered cultural outsiders, and this optimistic outcome is paralleled in their narratives. The gendered and racialized terms of Canada's social, cultural, and political institutions, however, also resonate in their works. Their narratives show evidence of racist policies towards minority groups and the frequent consideration of these groups through privileged, White, Western, and male frames. They present compromised versions of multiculturalist discourses of diversity and opportunity and revealing a Canada that is inhospitable, a site of unbelonging to those outside the EuroCanadian mainstream. Their texts thus offer multiple, nuanced, and complex versions of the nation from the angles of those inhabiting its margins, resisting the essentializing of Canada as either liberating space or oppressive society.

For Chong, in particular, writing her family's history and stories long shrouded in secrecy allows individual and communal deterritorializations and reterritorializations. Writing and witnessing within the contradictions of the rhetoric of inclusion and the realities of exclusion enable Chong to voice the struggle and survival of Chinese Canadian women, redeem her grandmother's

memory, and heal her mother; more importantly, her text becomes home, giving some closure to her own search for origins.

The turn to language to articulate a narrative of place and self is significant for the possibilities it offers for identity reconstructions and the power of telling one's own stories. In varying degrees, Badami, Lai, Sakamoto, Goto, and especially Chong, write aspects of their own lives or communities into their narratives, this act a "rewriting of the connections between different parts of the self in order to make a world of possibilities out of the experience of displacement" (Kaplan, "Deterritorializations" 368). In articulating experiences of othering at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, and in engaging in the difficult yet vital work of recovering the stories of their families and communities, they have reimagined a nation and staked out home as a space that, whether geographic or textual, denotes for them location, change, and identity.

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### **“THIS IS A HAPPY STORY. CAN’T YOU TELL?”: CELEBRATING COUNTERSTORIES**

*A whole new story has to be told, with fragments, with disruptions, and with self-conscious and critical reflections. And one has to do it right.*

— Himani Bannerji, “The Sound Barrier,” 134

Throughout this study, my central concerns have been those of textual representations of Asian migrant women who are minoritized in many ways because of their racialization, gender, and sexuality, and of attempts to repair their damaged identities through counternarratives. Their struggle is not only that, as diasporic subjects, their experiences in Canada, even upon arrival, are demarcated by discriminatory immigration policies and other forms of institutional racism; their stories are also predicated upon a history of absence and misrepresentation in master narratives—identification of which constitutes the initial step of narrative repair—producing a marginalizing common in Western canonical and critical discourses and popular culture. With Asia frequently constructed as the Other in hegemonic discourses, Asian Canadian women were in the past obscured by discursive silences and stereotyping, with today’s images of them still frequently defined by Orientalist and essentialist assumptions.

As Himani Bannerji suggests in “The Sound Barrier,” alternative new stories have to be told—the second step of counterstorying—since the possibilities for representing women of Asian heritage in Canada can be vigorously sustained in literature. Within this discursive space, Asian

Canadian women writers can use their imaginative power and influence to offer more nuanced representations and explorations of positionality, marginality, and displacement, and in so doing repair the damage resulting from harmful or dismissive master narratives.

In interrogating this (re)presentation and repair, I focus on writings from the mid-1990s—a period of critical flowering of Asian Canadian women’s writing—which can be seen as being in conversation with earlier key Asian Canadian texts such as *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, but take in new directions the subjects these earlier books raised. The texts I study are also ones that explicitly bridge the Canadian experience of the narrator or characters to life experiences (either their own or those of other women characters) in the country of their ancestral origin. These connections allow for a richer delineation of Asian Canadianness than would otherwise be possible, and for a subjectivity marked by hybridity and heterogeneity to be viable as cultural identity and political constituency. The five works included in this study—Anita Rau Badami’s *Tamarind Mem*, Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Larissa Lai’s *When Fox Is a Thousand*, and Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*—together provide critical counterstories to both the pervasive discursive silence about women of Asian ancestry in Canada during the early twentieth century and the few but powerfully damaging textual constructions of them authored by non-Asian Canadians.

At the heart of this study are these specific questions: Do these five sister narratives exemplify Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s conception of counterstories and thus effect narrative repair? If so, why and how do they engage in the project of dismantling the bias of damaging cultural scripts and Eurocentric literary hegemonies? And how do they urgently negotiate and renegotiate the problematics of gender and negative racialization and intervene in Asian Canadian women’s critical discussions of identity formation? My study is concerned with understanding the writers’

diverse authorial (re)presentations of Asian Canadian female selfhood and thus the diversity of counterstorying in their texts. While I attempt historical and theoretical contextualizing of their writing, I focus in particular on their instantiation of narrative repair, examining various forms of such repair evident in this narrative family.

The repair of Canadian memory of the nation's past is required because of past exclusionary, racist, and sexist operations of the Canadian state and the lack of acknowledgement or adequate valuing of the contributions of Asian Canadians. The Chinese Immigration and Exclusion Acts, the appropriation of Japanese Canadian property and the internment of Japanese Canadians in camps after Pearl Harbor, and the *Komagatu Maru* incident are iconic indicators of the racist treatment of Canadians or would-be Canadians. These violences and violations have damaged and continue to damage Asian Canadian identities, subverting versions of multiculturalist discourses of diversity and opportunity and revealing a Canada that is inhospitable, a site of unbelonging to those outside the EuroCanadian mainstream.

The texts under study attempt to repair these violations in various ways. They first dismantle notions of Canada as a house with a door welcomingly open to difference, and reveal it as sometimes oppressive socio-political and economic terrain. They then exhort Canada to be a more truly multicultural state and rewrite official history so that Asian Canadian perspectives and experiences are acknowledged. And they celebrate cultural fusions exemplified by textualized orature, silence, and code-switching, which all bring about a reterritorialization of language through writing orality, the mother tongue, and the vernacular.

The stories studied here are mostly narratives of history and heritage in which the past is recalled, refashioned, and renegotiated to help enact changes in the present. In slippages between fiction, autobiography, history, and cultural memory, the authors' discursive reconstructions of past

and place rebalance the pronounced asymmetries of power in intersubjective relations in what Mary Louise Pratt terms the “contact zone” between cultures and economies (6), allowing them to reconstitute Asian Canadian history from Asian Canadian perspectives and to challenge the authority of official narratives. Chong and Sakamoto, for example, inhabit textual spaces articulating personal, familial, and communal stories and call attention to critical moments in Asian Canadian history. They mix officially authorized memory with personal and familial histories, their texts becoming what Coral Ann Howells calls “act[s] of exorcism” (200) that name the specific oppression Asian communities in Canada experience and allow counter-cultural and minority voices to be heard and Asian identity and experience to be validated against dominant versions.

The five texts under study, written in the language of this bicultural experience, also define Canada as a site of exile and belonging, and of the text as home. While these narratives affirm national self-articulations of diversity and opportunity, possibly because of Asian Canadian struggles to make Canada live up to its vaunted multicultural ideals, their prevailing tenor recreates the nation as a space where Asians, socially constructed as *others*, can be marginalized. Badami’s, Chong’s, Goto’s, Lai’s, and Sakamoto’s references to a history of exclusionary legislation and insidious intolerance of Asians in Canada demonstrate that the nation, the supposed house of difference and home to immigrants, refugees, and exiles, across several cultures and multiple ethnicities, is not a site of belonging for negatively racialized women. In exploring the delimiting and debilitating impacts of racism, sexism, and classism on Asian Canadian women, the writers in this study construct a counternarrative, defining the host or adopted country, for the most part, as an unhomely territory inhospitable to those deemed culturally different by those who see themselves as the norm. The writers’ acts of narrative repair are attempts to make more accurate the national story

of the past and to make visible Asian Canadian contributions to making this country a space of belonging for a more diverse citizenry.

Additionally, a repair of the cultural memory of Chinese, Japanese, and to a lesser extent Indo Canadian groups is necessary because of factors like shame and isolation, alienation from ancestral home territories and cultures, and the negation or dismissal of Asian cultures and legacies. To respond to the need for this kind of repair, the texts under study, particularly Goto's and Lai's, produce cultural fusions that emphasize cultural difference not as deficit, but as richness, thus participating in the repair of the judgments of cultural deficit in colonial discourses. Their cultural fusions show the relationship between language, self, and place, especially the mix of two cultures resulting in innovations that recognize multiple affiliations. First, the spirit of generic experimentation common in decolonizing women's writing is evident in Lai's and Goto's traverses of conventional boundaries as they integrate Asian forms of orature into prose narratives: Chinese historical legends and fox mythologies in *When Fox Is a Thousand* and revisions of Japanese tales and legends in *A Chorus of Mushrooms*. Goto's rewriting involves a transformation of ancient heroines, as translated female characters in traditionally Japanese oral stories embrace Canadian values and ideals. Her characters are no longer explicitly and wholly Japanese, but mediate between two cultures. Second, their attempts through their narratives to transgress and transform dominant racist and patriarchally informed codes and their construction of an alternative poetics enable them to represent their own bicultural experiences, articulating various versions of Asian Canadian identities through simulations of orality. Goto's female genealogical storytelling, a mode of expression similar to the talking-story, and Lai's inclusion of the oral, both weave aspects of Asian culture into narratives to create another type of textual hybrid. Their use of Asian oral forms and the Canadian context of the retellings result in texts that hybridize language and the genres of history,

autobiography, textualized orature, fiction and myth. And, third, Badami, Chong, Goto, and Sakamoto code-switch, mixing English with their ancestral languages—Hindi, Cantonese and Mandarin, and Japanese respectively—to creatively transpose elements of these languages onto the pages of their texts. They infuse one of the official languages of Canada with the influences of another language and culture. Their transgressions reshape linguistic boundaries and work to unsettle the dominance of standard Canadian English. Their disruptions of standard English with their ancestral idioms not only appropriate the dominant language for their own purposes, but also revalorize their respective ancestral Asian tongues and rhetorical strategies such as silence, drawing freely from Asian cultures that value reticence and discretion.

Moreover, there is a need for repair because of culturally-specific devaluing of females that results in a coding of cultural memory in both Asia and Canada as predominantly masculine. Responding to the need for this specific kind of repair, these narratives liberate Asian Canadian women (and others) from shame, a sense of deficiency, and the racist and sexist constructions of not being Anglo-Saxon protestant and male. They do so by centering on the grandmother/mother/daughter triad that is predominantly marginalized in male-authored literature. They emphasize the task of reconstructing the broken matrilineage as especially difficult, but essential for healing, and the domestic space as critical to Asian Canadian women's identity formation. My study also shows that Asian Canadian extended families and the matrilineage challenge the Western concept of the sovereign, especially male, subject, recentering intergenerational kinships within Asian families and revaluing (grand)mothers as viable feminist models. While generational understandings of the past are different, those of the younger generation can repair those of previous generations, as Chong, Badami, and Goto show when they testify on behalf of (grand)mothers otherwise silent or silenced. In exploring the mother-daughter relationship as an ambivalent, permeable, distressing site that can



be jointly narrated, Badami, Chong, and Goto also emphasize the heritage and legacies of generations of Asian women, and chronicle, from mostly insider perspectives, their stories of struggle and survival.

This mode of repair also entails fictionalizing myth that is woman-centred; reimagining Asian women in Canada as various and multifaceted human beings and respectable agents; and affirming assertions of female experiences as sources of valid textual meanings. In the absence of nuanced images of Asian Canadian women in earlier literature and amidst the stereotypes of hegemonic and totalizing discourses, all five narratives offer alternative constructions of Asian women, all complexly and diversely situated in gendered and cultural struggles. These (re)presentations demonstrate the authors' refusals either to essentialize these women or participate in discursive scriptings of them as merely silent or sexualized. Challenging existing monolithic and reductive Orientalist stereotypes, Badami, Chong, Goto, Sakamoto, and Lai narratively repair the damaged identities of often debased Asian female figures. Their representations of transgressive sexuality and female power show complex split subjects engaging with the negative othering that history has imposed upon them. At the same time, these authors present contemporary diasporic or transnational subjects who, while resident in Canada, exceed the bounds of the Canadian nation as well as of those nations in Asia to which they have ancestral connections.

The stories under study also repair the damaged identities of Asian women with their female protagonists addressing questions such as "Who am I?" and "What does it mean to be female and Asian Canadian?" from marginalized positions of otherness. Their narratives, posed between at least two geopolitical spaces—their families' original Asian and their own Canadian homelands—develop identities that recognize the critical issues of boundaries and oppositionality, vexed positions of centre and periphery, of past and present, and of personal and cultural

experience, and the struggles of living in the contact zone of two or more cultures. From the overlapping of culturally-determined opposites such as the East and West, a space of possibilities is created and new constructions—more emancipated, certainly more complex and diverse, and clearly unhyphenated—are imagined. The writers then demonstrate how selfhood and identity construction in diaspora, as Wendy Ho suggests in the context of explorations of what it means to be Chinese American, is “not centrally about looking back to an immutable past for an originary of authenticated self, but projecting, envisioning, and enacting potential, and more emancipated selves in the present and future” (142).

Finally, narrative repair is necessary to damages created by Western valuations of speech and language, and the gendered and racialized constructions of women of Asian origin in North America that assume their silence is the result of their passivity and powerlessness. In response, the writers in this study attempt counterstorying in various ways. Sakamoto’s mobilization of silence as a rhetorical strategy is also a form of resistance to standard English and conventional Western narrative models. Her strategic silences—multiple plots, elliptical narration, gaps, and the use of dreams, memory, and fantasy—interrogate official Canadian history, particularly of the internment of Japanese Canadians. Her approach carries cultural and political ramifications: in transforming what King-Kok Cheung calls the “Japanese literary concision and nisei preference for indirection” (20), she emphasizes the inseparability of her ancestral culture and history from her and her characters’ stories, and translates both her Japanese and Canadian legacies to compose a hybrid self. And in telling the otherwise neglected stories of Asian and Asian Canadian women, all the authors in this study break the imperative of silence resulting from the combined effects of racism and sexism, what Lien Chao terms the “double silence” of “racial minority women” (221).

Chong's relocation of parts of her self, family, and community, especially those obscured by family secrets and historical or institutional silencing, to the pages of her text is also itself a mode of reterritorialization and repair. Revisiting May-ying's and Chan-Sam's conflicted experience honours their memory and gives them "a place in the world" (Chong qtd. in Kumagai) that serves as instructive model for all Canadians, and indeed citizens of every nation, whose identities have been damaged. Unearthing her family's shrouded history and her mother's tortured past allows Chong to realize the utopian potential to name otherwise unnamable truths and discover her voice and that of her people. Her text takes her on a journey literally and metaphorically, resolving what Teresa Zackodnik calls "her search for origin and identification" (52) and affirming her heritages as Chinese and Chinese Canadian. *The Concubine's Children*, similar arguably to all the other narratives included in this dissertation, becomes home, envisioning and enacting personal, familial, and communal transformations amidst considerable damage.

There is, for me, no more empowering act than the embrace of authorship by Asian Canadian women, many of whom have been relegated to the margins by the border-crossing experience, patriarchal practices in their ancestral homelands, and institutions of EuroCanadian power in the new country. Such resistance becomes even more compelling when it also translates to writing that creates new identities that engage with issues attendant upon migration, second- and third-generation Canadianness, and cross-cultural experiences.

The (re)presentation and repair that these writers initiated with these five books continue in later publications. Badami has written three more novels after *Tamarind Mem: The Hero's Walk* (2000), *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), and *Listen to the Trees* (2011). *Nightbird* travels back to India's history, a sweeping epic of three of the country's critical political turbulences: the Partition of India and Pakistan, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the bombing of Air India

Flight 182, allowing her to explore moral dilemmas amidst evil and celebrate the human spirit. *Hero's Walk*, shortlisted for several prizes, is as critically acclaimed as *Tamarind Mem*, winning the 2000 Marian Engel prize, the Regional Commonwealth Writer's Prize, and Italy's Premio Berto, and being named a *Washington Post* Best Book of 2001. Sripathi Rao of Toturparam, India, inhabits its pages, and Vikram Dharma of Merrit's Point, B.C., those of *Trees*; both are rich domestic dramas that not only continue to examine a subject fascinating for Badami—in-betweenness—but also offer opportunities for female perspectives and voices to be validated, which is critical to narrative repair.

After *The Concubine's Children* won the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction and the City of Vancouver Book Award and was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, Chong went on to write *The Girl in the Picture* (2000) and *Egg on Mao* (2009)—the first a biography of Kim Phuc, a Vietnamese girl who was terribly burned in a napalm attack in 1972, and the second the story of Lu Decheng, a young mechanic from Liuyang, China, who spent sixteen years in prison for throwing paint-filled eggs at Chairman Mao's portrait during the 1989 pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. In choosing to write about Phuc's and Lu's experiences, Chong also chooses to explore, as Diana Lary notes, "what it is to be human" and "to recognize what is good and decent and to demand respect and fairness" ("Chong, Denise"). What is, then, a continuing project is obvious in Chong's most recent publication, *Lives of the Family: Stories of Fate and Circumstance* (2013), which like, *The Concubine's Children*, tells a collection of stories of the Chinese diaspora, and of the struggles and successes of mid-century Chinese Canadian families.

Goto's interest in "kappas"—"creatures that exist in the twilight between humans and monsters" ("Hiromi Goto" 1)—has given her rich opportunities to blend Asian myth and the western genre of fiction to bridge worlds and to (re)present transmigrations and hybridized

identities, which she also initially explored in *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Her children's adventure novel *The Water of Possibility* (2001), her third novel *The Kappa Child* (2001), which won the James Tiptree Jr. Award and was nominated for the Sunburst Award that year, as well as other more recent works—*Hopeful Monsters* (2004), *Half World* (2009), and *Darkest Light* (2012)—have drawn from an assortment of creatures from Japanese folk legends (kappa, fox, yama-uba, tanuki, and magic cats), with these “archetypes,” according to Goto, “leap[ing] time and continents” to demonstrate the “human desire to intersect with the mythological” (1). In her writing, she continues to affirm Japanese voices, integrating untranslated Japanese words in her novels, and to tell of “conceptual gulfs” between racialized and non-racialised North Americans (3, 2), both bridge-building impulses that help reimagine Asian Canadian experience as valuably bicultural.

Like *When Fox is a Thousand*, Lai's second novel, *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), plays with historical and future narratives, juxtaposing them in a magic realist text that features, among others, an ageless shape-shifting female. *Salt Fish Girl*, which also won the Tiptree Award, the Sunburst Award, and the City of Calgary W.O. Mitchell Award, engages with enduring concerns such as gender and redemption from oppression, both central to the repair that Lai also attempts in her poetry, criticism, and other forms of writing.

Finally, Sakamoto's second novel *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003) uses an image from 1943 Japanese war propaganda—“one hundred million hearts beating as one human bullet to defeat the enemy”—to animate a fictional wartime story about a kamikaze pilot whose guilt in having survived his suicide mission intrudes on the lives of his daughters in Japan and Canada; these daughters eventually find redemption in their father's struggles. Like *The Electrical Field*, *One Hundred Million Hearts* explores racism in various guises during the war—several of the characters

are *niseis*—with Sakamoto’s insights into the legacies of Japanese Canadians also richly drawn and equally politically gratifying.

Badami, Chong, Goto, Lai, and Sakamoto do important social and ideological work with their (re)presentations of nuanced and diverse Asian Canadian female experiences often erased or demeaned in privileged social and public discourses and sites. Their recuperative and revisionary discursive works not only gain them entry into the once traditionally masculine and EuroCanadian world of textual meaning and literary production, but also explode damaging myths about Asian women in Canada and demonstrate an interlocking of gender, sexuality, culture, and race that opens their texts to new ways of reading. These narratives attest that the telling of Asian Canadian female experience was well underway in the mid-1990s, and the burgeoning field of Asian Canadian studies and scholarship that followed, as noted in the introduction, testifies to the rich ferment of critical activity on Asian Canadian literature. More theorizing of the complex identity formations of Asian Canadian women needs to happen, especially across feminist and racialized poetics and politics, but already the dialogue is compelling and the debate rich, speaking to the increasing centrality of Asian Canadian women’s studies as a field of critical and theoretical inquiry. My study builds community with those who seek to discover how Asian Canadian women’s subjectivities, identities, and experiences can be understood and related to one another; claims kinship with those who recognize the liberatory politics of this narrative family; and allows me with my specific focus on repair to contribute to urgent discussions on identity, transculturation, multiculturalism, and globalization in literary and cultural studies.

## ONE “HAPPY STORY” AT A TIME: THE TELLING AND LISTENING MUST CONTINUE

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*Writing is a hopeful act. And it's a very active thing. If you don't believe that change can come about, you won't write.*

— Kerri Sakamoto, “*A Sequel to Internment: Eva Tihanyi Speaks with Kerri Sakamoto*,” 2

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Naoe, the ceremonial family storyteller, bequeaths her stories and all their cultural and political significances to Murasaki: “I leave Murasaki behind, but she must shape her own location. And our stories entwine and loop around” (113). Murasaki accepts these gifts of stories and storytelling with joy:

I turned my head slowly in Obāchan's lap, the fabric scratchy and stiff. Inhaled dust and poetry. She stroked my forehead with her palm and her words, they flowed fluid. I snuggled close, curled my legs and stopped pretending to understand. Only listened. And listened. Then my mouth opened of its own accord and words fell from my mouth like treasure. I couldn't stop. (20-21)

As Murasaki recognizes, “the journey begins inside my head. With thoughts and words like my Obāchan before me” (192). In hers and Naoe's journeying, the power of (counter)stories is recognized and an important responsibility acknowledged: “We have only come part way in the telling and the listening. We must both be able to tell. We must both be able to listen. If the positions become static, there can never be stories. Stories grow out of stories grow out of stories. Listening becomes telling, telling listening” (172). Murasaki learns to tell her stories in Asian Canada, just as Naoe did, continuing the tradition of stories passed down from woman to woman, but now informed by the transformative power of counterstorying that allows her to retell and reimagine, among other things, her grandmother's history. As she writes in the novel's final pages, “*I rise ... like someone who has been sleeping for decades. Step through the open door. Away from*

*a room filled with the lingering echoes of spoken and unspoken tales. You know you can change the story*” (220 original italics).

The teller should relate not just any story, but one she has taken possession of, as Naoe herself explains to Murasaki, emphasizing the teller’s power to “*change the story*” (220). Murasaki’s own counterstorying, her emancipatory project of resurrecting her silent, eighty-five-year old Japanese grandmother as the mythic Purple Mask, demonstrates Goto’s understanding that identity, especially diasporic identity, can be rewritten. This fantasy, as potent a metaphor of the Asian Canadian woman as Goto thinks is possible, allows her to challenge dominant discourses and to repair damaged identities through stories of power. If identity is also constituted through (re)presentation, her text and those by Chong, Lai, Badami, and Sakamoto posit more nuanced, fuller images of their subjects, and revise distorted, disparaging, and limiting assumptions and stereotypes, initiating a more complex understanding of Asian Canadian women’s experience. Writing then becomes the liberatory act Sakamoto terms a “hopeful” gesture that could initiate changes, as Goto writes, one “happy story [at a time]. Nothing is impossible. Within reason, of course” (212).

The telling of and listening to counterstories must continue.



## NOTES

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### NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> I will explain my use of the term Asian Canadian without a hyphen later in the chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Since I am uncomfortable with making moral judgments about characters and authors, I prefer to revise the notion of morality in Nelson's formulation of the "respectworthy moral agent," considering simply the concept of the *respectworthy agent*.

<sup>3</sup> The hyphen is also, for Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, "charted in the interstices between the displacement of the 'histories that constitute it' and the rootedness of these histories in the politics of location" (16). For Benzi Zhang, the hyphen suggests "not a space but *spacing*," a movement that, especially in terms of diasporic identity, alternates between locations, historically and culturally (40, original italics). His argument acknowledges dual nationalisms, but also that the hyphen indicates an "extra dimension, a kind of 'foreignness' in national discourse" and implies "an origin, a seed, a core, or simply a foreign element in the midst of the performance of cultural differences" (45).

<sup>4</sup> See especially *Identity Politics Reconsidered* by Linda Alcoff, Michael Hames-García and Paula M. L. Moya and *Cartographies of Transnationalism in Postcolonial Feminisms: Geography, Culture, Identity Politics* by Jamil Khader for more detailed discussions on identity politics. For a brief history of identity politics, see Linda Alcoff's "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics."

<sup>5</sup> Homi Bhabha's emphasis on "ambivalence" or "hybridity," his formulation of colonial identity as not monolithic but ambiguous or hybrid, marks the site of colonial contestation as a "liminal" space in which differences are articulated and imagined "constructions" of cultural and national identity are produced (*The Location of Culture*).

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<sup>6</sup> Unmarked in this context means the absence of features, physical and visible, that might identify individuals as different from EuroCanadian. Prominent Canadians who are visibly different, such as Adrienne Louise Clarkson, originally from Hong Kong and the 26<sup>th</sup> Governor General of Canada, and Michaëlle Jean, from Haiti, the 27<sup>th</sup> vicereine, are not necessarily merely exceptions; their appointments as heads of state indicate, to an extent, the success of Canada's multiculturalism policy. The decisions to appoint them suggest a more respectful model of social relations, but, in my view, the practice of multiculturalism still falls short of its rhetoric. As Roy Miki, in *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing*, acknowledges, identity in contemporary Canada is still based on codes of visibility—"birth certificates, residential location, familial names, social codes for 'skin color' and gender"—which are then normalized to be made obvious or transparent (56).

<sup>7</sup> Since 1947 when the repeal of the Immigration Act allowed Chinese Canadians similar immigration rights to those of other groups, the Chinese Canadian population has risen significantly, with post-war immigrants usually young, urban dwellers (Li 92-94). Of more than 200 ethnic groups in Canada, the Chinese have comprised since the 1990s the largest visible minority group, now surpassing one million individuals ("Chinese Largest").

<sup>8</sup> Early immigration from India included the Punjabi Indian troops, based in the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, who travelled through Canada from Victoria to Halifax on their way to form part of 1,200 Indian troops assembled in London for the coronation of Edward VII in 1902 (Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava 5-6); a number subsequently came to work for the railway and in the lumber and fishing industries. However, subsequently, Punjabi Sikhs were barred from the British Columbia provincial militia (23).

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<sup>9</sup> See Jean Lee Cole's article, "Legacy Reprint: Newly Recovered Works by Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton): A Prospectus and Checklist," for more information on Eaton's literary legacy, especially her more recently discovered works.

<sup>10</sup> This examination of her writing began with the early recuperative scholarship of the 1980s and early 1990s and then developed a focus, from the mid-1990s onward, on what Dominika Ferens calls her "literary interventions into the essentialist discourses of race" (121).

<sup>11</sup> Xiaoping Li notes that Japanese Canadian women and postwar immigrant women from Japan, who met at the University of British Columbia campus in the 1970s, formed the majority of the Wakayama group (50), from which evolved the photo exhibition "A Dream of Riches." The Powell Street Festival and Katari Taiko (talking drums), the first Asian Canadian taiko group, which later created the all-woman taiko group Sawagi, also developed from the Wakayama. Similarly, many Asian Canadian women contributed to the radio program *Pender Guy* in 1976 and to other Asian or Chinese Canadian radio and television productions. And although the *Asianadian* was founded in 1978 by three men, it soon became a collective with half of its core members women. These women embraced political causes, including the plight of Toronto's garment workers, and spoke on behalf of Asian Canadian lesbians and grassroots organizations like Vancouver's India Mahila Association (X. Li 50), ushering in a period of considerable political and artistic activity, especially during the 1980s and the 1990s. Participants in these groups produced an immense collection of visual artwork and writings; directed plays and acted on stage; organized events such as "In Visible Colours," the women of colour film and video festival in Vancouver; and formed organizations like the Asian ReVisions and Loud Mouth Asian Babes. The latter is a theatre company which, as its mission states, aims to produce plays "by, for, and about Loud Mouth Asian women ... [who are especially] irrepressible, aggressively irreverent" (X. Li 51, 56).

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<sup>12</sup> Momoye Sugiman, who edited two *Asianadian* issues on women, acknowledged that in her own involvement in the “Breakthrough” collective, a campus feminist group at York University in Toronto, “I felt like somewhat of an outsider—perhaps because I was the only non-white woman in the group.” She observes that “although the women in the collective were intellectually sensitive to the pain of racism, none of them had actually experienced that pain. Thus the double prejudice faced by women of colour was not a major issue for them” (Sugiman, qtd. in X. Li 53).

<sup>13</sup> Montreal-born Baldwin, who moved back to India as a child, won the *Saturday Night*/CBC Literary Prize for her short story “Satya.” *What the Body Remembers* (2000) received the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize (Canadian/Caribbean Region) and *The Tiger Claw* (2004) was nominated for the Giller Prize. Ladha, from Mwanza, Tanzania, published two short story collections: *Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories* (1992) and *Women Dancing on Rooftops: Bring Your Belly Close* (1997). Espinet, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, had her first novel, *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), longlisted for the 2005 IMPAC Dublin Award, shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in the category of Best First Book (Caribbean and Canada Region), and selected for the 2004 Robert Adams Book Review Lecture Series. Mootoo, who wrote *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), was, in 1997, a finalist for the Giller Prize, a finalist for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the annual Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, and recipient of the New England Book Sellers award for that novel. Her *Valmiki’s Daughter* (2009) and *Moving Forward Sideways like a Crab* (2014) were also both longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

<sup>14</sup> *The Authentic Lie* (1982) and *From the Book of Nightmares* (1984), both collections of poetry, were written in Canada, as were her first and second books of adult fiction, *Feminist Fables*

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(1981) and *The Conversations of Cow* (1985, 1997). Her other poetry and prose collections include *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (1984) and *Flesh and Paper* (1986), *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), *St Suniti and the Dragon* (1993), and *Building Babel* (1996). Parameswaran's publications include *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* (1997); poetry collections *Trishanku and Other Writings* (1998) and *Sisters at the Well* (2002); two novellas and three short stories in *What Was Always Hers* (1999); and the dramas *Rootless But Green Are the Boulevard Trees* (1987) and *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* (1998). For *What Was Always Hers*, she received the 1999 New Muse Award and the 2000 Jubilee Award; she also won the Lady Eaton Award in 1967 and the Caribe Playwriting Competition in 1980.

<sup>15</sup> *Canadian Literature* has had other special issues on various types of Asian Canadian writing, among them Issue 132 (Spring 1992): South Asian Connections, Issue 140 (Spring 1994): East Asian Canadian Connections, Issue 190 (Autumn 2006): South Asian Diaspora, and Issue 199 (Winter 2008): Asian Canadian Studies. A special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* on South Asian Canadian Literature is forthcoming in mid-2015.

<sup>16</sup> These terms will be discussed and defined in more detail in Chapter 3.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Donald Goellnicht observes that *Obasan* is both an “auto-representational fiction” and a “theoretico-narrative” (341), while Grice labels it “part-fictional, part-historical, part autobiographical” (94).

<sup>18</sup> Other critics such as Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu list Lee's second and third names as Kwan Ying. In an Anglophone context SKY is more legible and recognizable than middle parts of her name, a Chineseness already arguably displaced by the moniker *Sharon*. Many Chinese, Japanese,

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and Korean North Americans do turn to similar English monikers, possibly to make their names more “hearable” and legible in Anglophone contexts.

<sup>19</sup> *The Mother-Daughter Plot* by Marianne Hirsch did not come out until 1989.

<sup>20</sup> This dissertation focuses only on works of the 1990s; writings that extend and complicate these discussions have been published after the period noted in this study.

<sup>21</sup> As John Burns suggests, *Tamarind Mem*’s “narrative reflects Badami’s own ‘gypsy’ upbringing and the ‘mishmash’ of various cultures that helped shape her development and free her from national boundaries” (3). Badami’s memories are gathered in her novel, and there are many parallels between her and Kamini: both were born in India and attended Catholic schools, speaking English at home. Both have railroad mechanical engineers for fathers, with both families constantly moving, their lives revolving around railway colonies in India. Like Badami, who originally entered Canada through Calgary, Kamini is based in Calgary, working on a graduate degree in chemical engineering.

Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* may be classified as ‘autoethnographic fiction,’ which Paul Lai identifies as “fiction that mimetically produces the cultural experiences of the author’s ethnic group (usually in non-white or off-white understandings of “ethnic”) (56). Parallels between Goto’s experience and that of Murasaki, one of her novel’s narrators, are apparent: both were born in Japan and migrated to Canada as young children. Their families eventually settled in Alberta, where both fathers fulfilled a dream of starting a mushroom farm. Goto’s grandmother also told her Japanese stories when she was growing up (“Hiromi Goto” par 2). And Naoe’s experiences in both Japan and Canada and those of her daughter Keiko and granddaughter Murasaki in Canada are based on the individual and collective experiences of Japanese immigrants like Goto and her family, making the novel’s case that ethnic, and in particular Japanese, communities in Canada have been

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discriminated against. Her text accurately represents the kinds of racial discrimination Japanese Canadians faced at the time the novel is set.

<sup>22</sup> Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand* similarly focuses on woman-to-woman connections, but since these are for the most part not mother-daughter relationships, they will not be examined in this section.

<sup>23</sup> In "Unveiling the Ghost: Denise Chong's Feminist Negotiations of Confucian Autobiography in *The Concubine's Children*," Quigley proposes that Chong's text is a "self-written biograph[y]" structured in ways paralleling traditional Confucian autobiography (238). Focusing on models written before the seventeenth century, Pei-Yi Wu, in *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China*, argues that the orthodoxy of Manchu rule returned autobiography to the form of annalistic biography. For Wu, "Chinese biography offered Chinese autobiographers ... a ready-made format for telling a life ... [and] a respectable precedent ... that might afford [them] some protection from the censure of egomania ..." (qtd. in Quigley 238). In "Suggestive Voices from the 'Storeroom of the Past': Photography in Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children*," Zackodnik observes that Chong's narrative embeds an autobiography "within the biographical narratives of her grandmother, grandfather, and mother" (52). Her text joins, therefore, a small but growing body of Asian North American women's writing which "disperses an autobiographical focus through multiple narratives of male and/or female relatives" (51).

<sup>24</sup> Denise Chong's text, as Quigley also suggests, connects with the traditional Chinese autobiographical format in its stance of impartiality, the third-person point-of-view, and its inclusion of the first-person narrative only within opening or closing remarks of a text based on historical lives, experiences, and opinions of others (238). She notes that while Chong erupts only

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briefly in her writing, with the narrative “I” prominent only in the first and the last few chapters, she “nonetheless circles the narrative, cradling her family’s history within the brief speaking presence of a narrative “I,” establishing the text as autobiography within the echoes of Confucian agency and form” (239).

<sup>25</sup> Such “continuity between generations and of an individual who is more than a singular and isolated self,” as Quigley suggests, also replicates Confucian autobiography. Recognizing Chong’s mix of “autobiographical confessional and biographical historical forms of autobiography” (241), Quigley notes how the narrative assumes the form of “life as a journey,” and “the uneasy relations within the multiple sites in which Chong is and is not interpolated can be read as her Confucian “life-long” quest for illumination” (249). *The Concubine’s Children* is situated, therefore, within the framework of self-enlightenment and the rhetoric of Confucian spiritual autobiography.

<sup>26</sup> While not universally practiced in China since it began in late the Sung dynasty, 960-1276, foot-binding is itself a form of female victimization, severely limiting mobility among Chinese girls and women of a variety of social classes until the revolution of 1949. There is little disagreement among historians that foot-binding is “exploitative,” causing enormous pain and exemplifying the “commodification of women’s bodies” (Ramusack and Sievers 183-84).

<sup>27</sup> The colour “yellow” used in reference to the Chinese had derogatory connotations, recalling terms such as “yellow-belly,” which means a coward; or “yellow streak,” denoting a “trait of cowardice”; or “yellow-dog,” a trade-union movement epithet which marks a “scab” or one who fraternizes undermines fellow labourers. This slang for Chinese, according to Constance



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Backhouse, was “both artificial and fallacious,” having no basis in skin tone, but, as was common in early-twentieth Canada, using the idea of colour to negatively characterize race (135-36).

<sup>28</sup> According to Elaine Chow, adherence to Asian values—“obedience, collective and familial interest, fatalism, and self-control”—can foster “submissiveness, passivity, pessimism, timidity, inhibition, and adaptiveness” (368). Acceptance of mainstream American (and by extension, North American) values of “independence, individualism, mastery of one’s environment through change, and self expression” generates, on the contrary, other values such as “self-interest, aggressiveness, initiative, and expressive spontaneity” (368). As is evident in the texts under study, this listing is clearly reductive, with much of the reimagining and repair the writers do in their work contesting these assumptions.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Said’s formulation of Orientalism is of “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2). For Said, the Orient, of which Asia is a part, is very much the Occident’s Other: “My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness” (204). Orientalism produces and perpetuates the distortions and inaccuracies of a wide variety of assumptions pertaining to the Orient; Said thus calls for a rejection of Orientalism, emphasizing instead the representation and study of the peoples from their own perspectives (327).

<sup>30</sup> Hing herself suffers from racialized and gendered discrimination, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> Elaboration of Denise Chong as a “freed subject” finding semblances of discursive redemption in *The Concubine’s Children* can be found in chapter 5, which notes her book as also Chong’s reterritorialized space.

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## NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

<sup>32</sup> The railway, although it connects people, is arguably a primary technology of imperialism, disrupting the equation between self and place through its universalizing of time in train schedules.

<sup>33</sup> The three stories come together because Artemis is eventually magically haunted by the Fox in the poetess's body (Lai, *WFT* 123). Fox appears to Artemis as a woman with bleached hair growing out (e.g. 169, 205).

<sup>34</sup> While the narration about Artemis is in the third person, the narrative is mostly limited to her perspective.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

<sup>35</sup> According to Lai, the tree, used as an icon to signal the contemporary narrative, is a symbol of "inherent life and troubled darkness" ("*When Fox*"), and signifies the promise and the turmoil of Artemis's (and her friends') existence in the present, predicated on and challenging negative racializations and heteronormativity.

<sup>36</sup> A parallel to be drawn here in terms of the damage to female identity or threat to the identity of a writer/scholar is what Amma, in Badami's *Tamarind Mem*, says about women's words. This insistence on domesticity both rationalizes the exclusion of women from traditional male privileges such as education and careers, and sanctions their inferiority and subordination.

<sup>37</sup> According to Luo, "this version tells how the planet Venus became visible in the daytime, signifying that 'a woman would become emperor, taking the place of the sons of heaven' ...

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and how the empress, in order to gain favour and power, poisoned, murdered, and cut off the limbs of other women and put them in jars to die” (123, quoting *WFT* 162).

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

<sup>38</sup> For Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*, code-switching also involves shifts from standard English to (more local forms of) one of culturally diverse varieties of English.

<sup>39</sup> Food in this context may also function semiotically, as it does in Fred Wah’s use of food as a metaphor in *Diamond Grill* and as Arjun Appadurai suggests in “Gastropolitics in Hindu South Asia,” in which he represents food, “at least in many human societies, as a marvelously plastic kind of collective representation” (494).

<sup>40</sup> For Shao-Pin Luo, “this newly-hatched language is neither English nor Japanese—it is English grown from the seeds of Japanese; it is Japanese shaped by the prairie winds. Both languages are stretched and scattered yet connected by grandmother and granddaughter, woven together by ‘streamers of silken thread’” (119). As Naoe explains to Murasaki, “the words are different, but in translation, they come together” (Goto, *CM* 174).

<sup>41</sup> There are a few Japanese words in *The Electrical Field* that are italicized, but these tend to be words related to sexuality that Asako teaches Sachi. An example is this passage: “I longed to take back time, take back the words to that silly game between Sachi and Tam. *Chi chi, chikubi, chin chin, chimpo*. I’d convinced myself it was harmless babble. But word by word I’d sent them into a forbidden place, so tiny and dark that they would never climb out” (262). It is likely that these words are rendered in italics because of their status as words being defined.

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<sup>42</sup> In noting feminist critics who have explored silence as a strategy in the work of women writers, King-Kok Cheung cites Susan Stanford Friedman, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1983, 1986), Julia Kristeva (1980), and Elaine Showalter. Some of these critics, as Cheung adds, have also been influenced by Marxist critics like Pierre Macherey and Terry Eagleton, who have elaborated on narrative gaps and silences (4).

<sup>43</sup> To a much lesser extent than Kerri Sakamoto, Larissa Lai also engages with silence as a rhetorical strategy. The tales in *When Fox Is a Thousand* give it its intense volubility, but there are gaps and fissures in the narrative where the contemporary characters are concerned.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

<sup>44</sup> In her article, Gunderson cites two critiques of Canada's multiculturalism policies. From Robert Harney: multiculturalism glosses over issues of immigrant exploitation by diverting attention away from class differences within ethnic groups and by representing the immigrant's condition primarily in terms of law, power, and class (82); and from Caroline Knowles: official multiculturalism lacks a conception of power because "it really only supports the expression and celebration of private forms of difference: in family, food, religious conventions, and so on" (49).

<sup>45</sup> Badami attributes the gap in discussions of Canada in *Tamarind Mem* to her lack of familiarity with the country at the time of the novel's composition in 1996, since she only arrived in Canada from India in 1991. As she acknowledges in an interview, "I feel you have to live in a place, breathe it in, get it into your blood stream. ... [Tamarind Mem] I wouldn't have been able to set entirely in Canada, because it would [have meant] writing on the surface" (Burns, "Railway Child" 30).

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